

# PREACHING IN AN ORAL AGE: PREACHING STYLES THAT “SPEAK” TO A POST-LITERATE GENERATION<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

“**T**his is not your father’s Oldsmobile!”

Can you believe that it’s been almost twenty years since that commercial first appeared on television?<sup>2</sup> Sales for Oldsmobile were lagging—lagging significantly. General Motors knew that the Oldsmobile did not appeal to the younger, “hip” generations. Oldsmobiles were for “old folks,” just as the name indicated. At least that’s what the marketing types said Boomers and Busters were thinking. So the Oldsmobile Division decided to re-invent itself, just as Madonna has successfully done a number of times in her remarkable career.

The approach the marketing people suggested was designed to tell young people that the new Olds was nothing like the Oldsmobile their parents drove. There were new, eye-catching ads, starting with a series of quick snapshots of a car with stylish lines and striking colors. Then the viewer saw the same car in action, zooming down a winding road. In half a minute Oldsmobile tried to convince the twenty- and thirty-somethings that the stodgy, conservative, yes, boring Olds of the past was no more. There was a new Olds for the now generation.

Unfortunately for Oldsmobile, that strategy didn’t work. In fact, there are those who contend that the marketing approach Oldsmobile adopted sounded the death knell for that venerable automobile. These analysts say that the new Olds was too much of an oxymoron and the ads only highlighted the fact that the times had passed Olds by and Olds hadn’t been able to close that gap. Whether or not that is true is for marketers and analysts to decide. But we do know that in April of 2004 the last Oldsmobile came off the assembly line in Lansing, Michigan. Olds is no more—new or old.

Even though Oldsmobiles are no longer being produced, the catchphrase of the Oldsmobile ads has made its way into the vernacular.

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<sup>1</sup>Presented to the California Pastoral Conference, Citrus Heights, CA on January 31, 2006, and to the Arizona Pastoral Conference, Kingman, AZ on May 2, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>The first advertisement using this slogan appeared in the summer of 1988.

“This is not your father’s Oldsmobile!” appears both in print and in daily conversation. It has become one of the watch-words of our day, similar to Dorothy’s comment to Toto, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” Like Dorothy’s famous line, the Oldsmobile slogan is invoked not just to show us that “the times they are a-changing,” to quote Bob Dylan, but to convince us that we must change with them or they will pass us by.

The need to adapt to the changing times is evident in a number of areas. There have been dramatic changes in the way we do our banking, pay our bills, communicate with one another, conduct research, keep ourselves amused. But for our purposes, the area of interest is homiletics. Here, too, there has been a significant change, dare we say, a seismic shift. What began as a slight tremor that was first felt at a little seminary in Oklahoma in 1971<sup>3</sup> has increased in intensity over the past thirty-five years, and the shock waves have reverberated across ecclesiastical America, rearranging the homiletical landscape. The sermon that was preached in many of the 350,000+ religious gatherings in our country last Sunday was not your father’s homiletical Oldsmobile. There is a new, markedly different sermonic model, a model designed specifically for today’s audience.

How are you and I to respond to the changes in preaching? Most of us were trained in the time-honored deductive or propositional approach to preaching, what has been labeled the “three-points-and-a-poem” method. We state the proposition or general truth that we want the congregation to know and then we unfold the two or three points under that truth. (We often conclude with a “poem” or verse from a familiar hymn. Hence the “three-points-and-a-poem” label.) Is this deductive or propositional approach the most effective way to communicate with audiences today, particularly with those in the Boomer, Buster and Bridger<sup>4</sup> generations? Or is our father’s homiletical vehicle hopelessly outdated, better suited for a sermonic museum than a modern sanctuary?

In this presentation we want to re-examine our homiletical methods from several different perspectives. We will begin by asking whether preaching is the most effective way of communicating today. Then we will consider briefly why we continue to use an old form of communication in an age in which preaching does not seem to have much currency. After that, we will peruse some of the guidelines Scripture gives for preaching. Our fourth section will look at the changing culture in which we preach, especially the changes that have taken

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<sup>3</sup>Fred Craddock’s book, *As One Without Authority*, which was published in 1971, is usually credited with launching what is now known as “the new homiletic.”

<sup>4</sup>Ed. note: “Busters” is another term for “Generation X.” “Bridgers” are so-called because they spent their formative years in two different centuries.

place in communication and epistemology. We will then spend a few minutes considering the unique challenges of communicating in a secondarily oral<sup>5</sup> age. In the sixth section we will suggest a method of preaching that is compatible with the learning style of modern audiences. We will then talk about letting the text control the shape and structure of the sermon. Finally, we will offer a number of practical suggestions on how to implement the preaching style we suggest. We pray the Holy Spirit will bless us so we can better fulfill our high calling as spokesmen for the Lord of glory.

### I. Rethinking the Effectiveness of Preaching

Is preaching passé? Is the ancient practice of one person talking for twenty or thirty minutes while everyone else sits and listens woefully out-of-place in the twenty-first century? Is the art that once invaded empires, gathered souls, and built the church for Christ the least effective way of doing the Lord's work today?

There are those who suggest that the sermon will have to give way to newer and more effective ways of communicating—ways much better suited to the personality, interests, and epistemology of today's audiences. Those who would replace the sermon with something they consider more effective may not be as vitriolic in their assessment of preaching as is Anthony Trollope's narrator in *Barchester Towers*. You may recall his extended lament about preachers:

There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and untruisms and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanor as though words of impassioned eloquence or persuasive logic fell from his lips.

Let a professor of law or physics find his place in a lecture-room and there pour forth jejune words and useless empty phrases, and he will pour them forth to empty benches. Let a barrister attempt to talk without talking well, and he will talk but seldom. A judge's charge need be listened to perforce by none but the jury, prisoner and gaoler. A member of Parliament can be coughed down or counted out. Town councillors can be tabooed. But no one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age, the old man whom we Sinbads cannot shake off, the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday's rest, the incubus that overloads our religion and makes God's service distasteful. We are not forced into church. No, but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to

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<sup>5</sup>Ed. note: "Secondarily oral" is explained below.

stay away. We desire, nay, we are resolute, to enjoy the comfort of public worship, but we desire also that we may do so without an amount of tedium which ordinary human nature cannot endure with patience; that we may be able to leave the house of God without that anxious longing for escape which is the common consequence of common sermons.<sup>6</sup>

Most people do not feel quite as strongly about preachers as does Trollope's spokesman, but listening to a sermon is not on the "must-do" list of most people. With the exception of Billy Graham, preachers rarely rank among "The Ten Most Admired Americans" or "The Ten Most Influential People." And preaching is not a word that connotes a favorable experience. Comments such as, "Don't 'preach' at me!" or "He was too 'preachy'" really say it all in the minds of many people—and they are not offering a compliment.

What is interesting is that an increasing number of voices inside the church are questioning the wisdom of relying on preaching to get across our message. Many church experts feel that preaching is an ineffective way of communicating with today's audience. Some time back Baylor University's Truett Seminary sponsored a conference on "Music and Worship in an Emerging Culture." The keynote speaker at the conference posited that traditional preaching will not hold its primary position in worship services of the future, and the conference attendees generally seconded that sentiment. One may be able to understand why the people felt that way. Perhaps the sermons they regularly hear are really like "tying a Scripture to a chair and beating it with a rubber hose for twenty minutes to see what you can get out of it." That is how one speaker characterized traditional preaching.<sup>7</sup> If that is the sort of sermon they're hearing week after week, we might support the suggestion that the sermon give way to more effective ways of communicating, perhaps even to extended periods of contemplation and meditation. The sounds of silence may be preferable to the shrieks coming from a passage being beaten with a homiletical hose!

When people are calling for periods of silence instead of a proclaiming of the Word, or when they are suggesting that we replace preaching with music, dance, and art, we should at the very least consider the question, "Why do we still preach?" Our members are not unaware that the question is being raised. Some of them may have visited churches that are using alternative forms of conveying their message and they may have been impressed by that. What is more, we

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<sup>6</sup>Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (New York: The Century Club, 1902), pp. 49-50.

<sup>7</sup>This comment was attributed to Brian Maclaren in his talk, "The Bad News About the Good News, and the Good News About the Bad News."

here may have the uncomfortable feeling that there are more effective ways of calling people out of the darkness of sin and unbelief and into the glorious fellowship of the saints. So why do we in the confessional branch of the Lutheran church still communicate through the spoken words of a sermon?

## II. The Divine Mandate Behind Preaching

The answer is no farther away than the inspired Word, and for us that answer is obvious. Preaching carries a divine mandate. "Preach the Gospel" (Mark 16:15),<sup>8</sup> our Lord said in words that are etched in the minds of all who attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The Greek directive that was inscribed in large letters over the chancel of our seminary chapel is part of our Lord's final instructions to His church. Preaching is our *Lord's* idea, not *ours*. He is the One who commanded it. It did not generate in the minds of men. That is why Paul told his young colleague, Timothy, "Preach the Word" (1 Ti 4:2), using the same word for "preach" (*kyrusso*) that our Lord used. Those whom the Lord calls into the pastoral ministry of His church are to serve as heralds, announcing publicly the message of love and forgiveness their King has entrusted to them.

It would be instructive to do a word-study of the thirty-seven different words for preaching and communication that are used in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Consider what we could learn from just that one word, *kyrusso*. It shows the public, authoritative role of those entrusted with the responsibility to preach. That word also reminds us that we preachers have been given the message that we are to proclaim and that we are not to add to or subtract from it. We are to pass on the Word and apply it to our hearers as we have received it. In a study of the New Testament words used for preaching we would find a wide variety, ranging from the more formal, heraldic nature of *kyrusso* to the "chatty," conversational nature of the onomatopoeic *laleo*. We would see that some words (e.g., *lego*) stress gathering, selecting and then enumerating specific points to make a general, over-all point,<sup>10</sup> while others (*didasko*) focus on the instructional aspect of preaching. We would also note that there are some words (such as *euangelidzomai*) that focus on the content of the message being proclaimed, stressing its joyous nature, while others (*diermeneuo*) convey the importance of explaining a message that is not naturally understood. What would be

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<sup>8</sup>All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from *The New King James Version* of the Bible.

<sup>9</sup>For a good, brief discussion of these words, see David L. Larson, *The Company of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990), pp. 52-53.

<sup>10</sup>Ed. note: A meaning of "gather" or "enumerate" for λέγω is attested in classical Greek. How much this sense persists in New Testament usage could be questioned.

clear from every New Testament passage about preaching is that preaching is not an option, but an obligation. Our Lord Himself has commanded us to preach, and the divine mandate behind preaching is reason enough for us to continue this ancient art of speaking.

But there is another, equally compelling reason we value preaching so highly, yes, give it first place in our ministry. In writing to the people at Corinth, Paul says, “Christ . . . (sent me) to preach the Gospel” (1 Co 1:17). Preaching was the apostle’s primary responsibility, even above baptizing. Paul knew that his age, not unlike ours, did not value preaching highly. He realized that preaching about the cross of Christ was considered ridiculous, yes, even offensive to many. And yet, the apostle knew he *had* to preach. He understood that “it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Co 1:21). Having a man stand up and just “talk” to people about Christ’s death on Calvary is the way God draws people out of the unbelieving world to life and salvation in His Son.

We do not want to lose sight of the divine power that accompanies our “simple little sermons,” as Luther once characterized his preaching. Because of the heraldic nature of our preaching—because we are proclaiming the Lord’s own Word—that Word brings about the most miraculous changes. Peter talks about that in his first epistle when he writes: “(You) have been born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the Word of God, which lives and abides forever” (1 Pe 1:23). Through our weak and stammering proclamation of the Gospel the Holy Spirit plants His inspired Word in the hearts of our hearers, and by that Word He creates new life. Our hearers are “born again,” rising by faith with Christ from the death of sin and unbelief and being made alive spiritually. The Holy Spirit calls people to faith by the Gospel we proclaim in our sermons (2 Th 2:14) and then He empowers them to live their lives as followers of the Lord (1 Th. 1:5-7). When we step into the pulpit with the Word of God on our lips, the Holy Spirit gives wings to that Word and carries it to the hearts of our hearers, bringing about the most miraculous change. Therefore it is absolutely essential that we preach, for it is through the preaching of the Gospel that the Spirit gathers and builds the church of Christ.

As one reflects on the divine mandate behind preaching and the transforming power of preaching, it is not difficult to understand why Paul says, “Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Co. 9:16). Each of us feels that same “necessity” that Paul speaks of—that same, undeniable, irresistible compulsion. Preaching may not be popular in today’s world. Even if preachers are not charged with being the “bores” Trollope labeled them, they still rate just slightly above used car salesmen in the polls. There are also the eager naysayers who insist that preaching isn’t very effective. After all, we supposedly remember only ten per-

cent of what we hear. (This oft-quoted statistic does not take into account the fact that the Holy Spirit does His heart-changing, life-renewing work through the Gospel—and the Spirit is not limited to what human statistics say.) But all the doubts and denigrations of men dissipate under the power of divine precept and promise. We *have* to preach, both because our Lord has commanded it and because His Spirit uses it to carry out His work. Not only is there a place for preaching today; it has the preeminent place, mandated by our Lord Himself.

### III. Scriptural Guidelines for Preaching

Since we have no choice but to preach, the question that remains is not *whether* but *how*. How are we to present the joyous news that in Jesus we've been rescued from the prison-house of sin and raised to the status of God's own sons? Is there a "best way" to proclaim that message?

Scripture does not give us directives about "the only way to preach," which is not surprising. We know, for one thing, that "there are diversities of gifts" (1 Co 12:4). Not every preacher has exactly the same spiritual gifts any more than every Christian has the same gifts. In his requirements for those entrusted with the spiritual oversight of souls Paul does say that preachers must be "able to teach" (1 Ti. 3:2). But beyond that, the apostle does not mandate a particular preaching style. He does say that some will have the gift of "prophecy" (1 Co 14:1). And both a comparison with Romans 12:6 and the context of 1 Corinthians 14 show that Paul means the ability to explain and apply the Word of God to the hearts and lives of God's people. But the apostle does not indicate the style of preaching those with this particular gift are to adopt.

The lack of a scriptural mandate for how one is to preach does not mean that the Bible leaves us without guidelines for the preaching style we employ. In 1 Corinthians Paul offers a number of directives for proclaiming the message of the cross. For example, in chapter two he tells the Christians in that town that was a center of rhetoric, "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Co 2:4). The word for "persuasive" that Paul uses is an instructive one, for it refers to the sophistic rhetoric that was so common in Hellenistic Greek.<sup>11</sup> (Some also feel that Paul's use of the word refers to the halakhic and haggadic style prevalent in Jewish public presentations at the time. And one can make a convincing case for that, especially in view of the midrashic techniques Paul employs in passages such as 1 Corinthians

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<sup>11</sup>Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1998), p. 350.

15:54-55 and 1 Corinthians 12:2-31a.) What is beyond dispute is that Paul has Greek rhetorical devices and techniques in mind, because the word for “demonstration” is a technical term drawn from the Hellenistic speaking manuals of the day. The word in the original refers to arguments or “proofs” that a speaker gathered for his presentation—arguments that were designed to lead hearers to an obvious or unmistakable conclusion. Paul makes it clear that he did not rely on rhetorical techniques or logical arguments in his preaching, but on the Holy Spirit. The effectiveness of Paul’s preaching was not dependent on pleasing words, persuasive arguments, or a compelling style. Instead, he spoke “in “weakness” (v. 3), without rhetorical ornamentation or sophistic embellishment, so that the faith of his hearers would be due to the power of the Spirit, not the persuasiveness of the apostle.

It is interesting to note that even though the apostle disavows reliance on rhetorical techniques, he is still willing to use them in the service of the Gospel. In some ways Paul’s writings, especially his letters to the people at Corinth, provide case studies of many rhetorical and literary devices.<sup>12</sup> The whole structure of 1 Corinthians, for example, follows the standard epistolary form of the day with an opening, a main body, and a closing. In addition, the form of argumentation the apostle uses in 1 Corinthians 15:1-58 reflects the deliberative style, 1 Corinthians 9:1-27 is judicial in form, and 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13 is epideictic in its structure. In addition, Paul uses the diatribe (1 Co 15:29-41), chiasm (1 Co 11:8-18), paraenesis (1 Co 5:6) or *topoi* (1 Co 8:1-13), vice and virtue lists (Gal 5:19-23), liturgical fragments such as blessings (2 Co 1:3-4) and doxologies (Ro 11:36), poetry (1 Co 13:1-3) and hymns (Php 2:6-11), and portions of creeds (1 Co 15:3-5). Paul repeatedly used the literary devices and the rhetorical techniques of his day in support of the Gospel.

Why did the apostle use a strongly literary and rhetorical style? He gives the answer when he lays down the oft-quoted principle, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Co 9:22b). Paul’s primary concern was to win souls for Christ, and in that noble cause he would do whatever necessary to turn the hearts of lost and rebellious souls back to the Savior. When he was speaking to the people of Corinth, he would present his “argument” in a form they accepted and he used devices they would have appreciated. When he was addressing those from a Jewish background, he would use the method of the midrash and the *peshet*.<sup>13</sup> He did this not because he

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<sup>12</sup>For an excellent introduction to the literary and rhetorical forms employed in the New Testament, see James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup>Ed. note: *Peshet* often refers to the ahistorical, contemporizing re-use of a scriptural text during the Second Temple Period. An example is the Qumran text 1QpHab



felt that was the only way to convince and convert his hearers, but because he recognized that this was a way to gain a hearing with them. The apostle always relied on the Spirit and His power to work faith in hearts. But recognizing the psychological working of the Word as well as the supernatural, Paul did everything he could, humanly speaking, to present the message of the cross in a winsome way.

In that context, the apostle made a statement that we may want to consider carefully. In chapter two of 1 Corinthians Paul stated that he did not rely on the “persuasive words of human wisdom,” as we mentioned. Later in the same chapter he repeated that same idea in a slightly different way after affirming the verbal inspiration of his writings (1 Co 2:12-13a). He said, “(We) express spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Co 2:13b). The form of the second word translated as “spiritual” can be either neuter (“spiritual things”) or masculine (“spiritual persons”). In the context it seems best to follow the NIV’s translation “spiritual things.” In that case Paul is reminding us of the importance of using an appropriate vocabulary as we speak of the things of God. It has become popular today to be more “hip” (You can tell what generation I’m from just by my choice of that word!) and to employ the jargon of the day. We are encouraged to “get down to the level of your audience and speak their language.” But as we reflect on Paul’s words, we may find greater encouragement to elevate and expand the vocabulary of our modern audience. In our sermons we can speak in a way that teaches our hearers the language of Scripture, rather than limiting our conversation with them to the language of the street. The words of Scripture are spirit and life, and they not only increase our hearers’ understanding of God’s plan of salvation and give them insight into the wonders of His love; those words bring them to faith or build them up in the faith. We do well, therefore, to use the “peculiar speech” of Scripture, as William Willimon’s little book by that name encourages, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.<sup>14</sup>

We can sum up what we have been saying by listening once more to Saint Paul, this time in his letters to his friends and coworkers, Titus and Timothy. One of Paul’s encouragements to Titus as he ministered on the island of Crete was to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Tit 2:1). Both the manner of one’s preaching style and the content of his pulpit vocabulary should be appropriate to the high subject he is discussing. One should not speak of the things per-

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“Peshar Habakkuk”), in which Habakkuk’s message of coming judgment at the hands of the Babylonians is interpreted as referring to the Roman threat in the commentator’s own day. In this article the term refers to a way of structuring discourse, not to a particular hermeneutic.

<sup>14</sup>William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

taining to God in language more appropriate to the back alley. Rather, the preacher will choose his words carefully. He will look for those words that are “fitting” or “suitable” (which is how the word translated as “proper” [*prepei*] can also be rendered)<sup>15</sup> for the teachings of sacred Scripture. Paul felt strongly enough about this matter to repeat the exhortation in his very last letter, the second one he wrote to Timothy. He told Timothy, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Ti 1:13). Both Paul’s rhetorical style and use of words are a model or example for us to imitate in the pulpit. The glorious message God has put on our unclean lips deserves to be expressed in fitting words as well as delivered in an appropriate style.

#### **IV. The Seismic Shift in Communication and Epistemology**

How can we most effectively bring the Gospel message to people in the twenty-first century? What style of preaching and what type of speech will, from a human perspective, best draw lost sinners to the cross and fill their hearts with peace?

To answer that question, we need to be aware of the audience to which we proclaim the good news about Jesus’ rescuing us. Before Paul could “become all things to all men,” he needed to know the people he would be addressing. He needed to understand not only what they thought and believed, but how they formed those beliefs. In other words, he needed to know their epistemology as well as their philosophy—and that is still necessary for us today.

For the last ten to fifteen years most pastors have spent a considerable amount of time acquainting themselves with the postmodern age, and that is appropriate. We want to know the thinking of the audience we address on Sunday morning, and that means becoming familiar with their beliefs and mind-set. Most of us here can recite the main characteristics of post-moderns: rejection of absolute truth, belief that truth is relative and personal, loss of a unifying principle for life and an attendant loss of meaning in life, antipathy toward claims of exclusivity, disenchantment with authority, elevation of subjective experience (and emotions) above objective reasoning, reliance on pragmatism instead of philosophical beliefs, concern for connection and community, interest in the “spiritual.” You can undoubtedly add to this list, but the point is that most of us have tried to find out “what makes them tick”—“them” being the most recent generations, especially those who have been born since the early- or mid-eighties.

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<sup>15</sup>Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 213.

While we have tried to analyze the thinking of the postmodern, we have not spent as much time on their thought process. We have become acquainted with their philosophy—a term that will not necessarily endear one to true post-moderns!—but we have not always familiarized ourselves with their epistemology. How do people process information these days? How do they come to hold their beliefs, whatever those beliefs may be? These are questions to which we have not given as much attention as we might, which is surprising. It is surprising because we are called to teach others—to teach them the whole counsel of God; to help them understand what our gracious God has done for us in Jesus; to show them what He now asks of us. We, above all people, do well to consider how those who hear our sermons and sit in our Bible classes process the truths we present from God’s Word. And we, who are interested in having God’s truth take over our hearer’s hearts as well as their heads, will want to know the most effective ways, humanly speaking, of achieving those objectives.

#### ***A. The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Literate Age***

One of the things we need to realize is that there has been a significant change in the way people learn these days. About 550 years ago (somewhere between 1453 and 1456), the first Bible was printed on John Gutenberg’s press in Mainz, Germany. The introduction of the printing press ushered in what Marshall McLuhan terms “the Gutenberg Galaxy.”<sup>16</sup> The world was radically reshaped by Gutenberg’s invention (or should we say, re-invention?) of moveable type, and one of the most dramatic changes came in the way people learned. The oral age, in which people disseminated information largely by talking to one another, effectively came to an end, at least in most of Europe. In a relatively short period of time the literacy rate skyrocketed and people all across Europe were able to read for themselves such things as the Bible, the newly-recovered classical literature, the news sheets about the advance of the Turks or the wars between the pope and the emperor, and even the writings of an obscure monk named Martin Luther.

The impact of the printing press was far greater than most people understand. As the fifteenth century moved from the oral to the literate age, there was a shift in the way people passed on information to one another and in the way the receptors processed that information. The oral age had developed its own speech patterns and thought arrangements to convey information. (One gets a good idea of what oral communication at its best is like by reading Homer or Virgil.) Oral communication often relied heavily on stories to instruct, inform,

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<sup>16</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (New York: Signet, 1969).

or inspire. The stories were structured in a rather predictable way, with set formulae, stock characterizations, repeating connective expressions, recurring transitional phrases and highly imagistic language. The artistry of the narrator drew the audience into the events he related, and through the creative retelling of those events the audience experienced or lived along with the main characters the experiences the narrative unfolded. Through those situations which the hearers lived and experienced for themselves, those hearers also learned the truths the narrative was designed to teach. What is more, by relating those narratives, the speaker created a community, establishing a bond not only between the admirable characters and his supporters in the story, but between the people who listened to the story and accepted its teaching.

How different is literary communication—words on a page that one follows with the eyes instead of hearing with the ears! For one thing, the written word is linear, drawing the eye back and forth across the page—a linearity that is reflected in the line of argument. The printed text is very logical—or at least that is what good writing aims to achieve. Instead of the oral narrative approach, which may move by intentional misdirection and unexpected turns and which trades on suspense and unresolved issues, the written text moves in a logical, orderly fashion as it presents one truth after another. In place of the conflicts and surprises which are an intrinsic part of oral narration, the literate communicator presents his truth in an orderly, progressive way. Each succeeding point flows from the preceding one and follows it up in a very logical sequence as the writer unfolds his abstract truths or propositional statements. The overarching truth the writer wants to convey comes across in carefully reasoned argument, not in emotional appeals. The written text appeals to the reader's head, not his heart, and the reader is persuaded by the strength of the writer's logic, not by the emotions he arouses in the reader or the experience he creates for his reader.

Many of us here received our education in the literate age. This includes our homiletical instruction, and our sermons reflect that. While we present our sermons orally, we construct them in a literate fashion, and much of what we have just said about literary texts generally applies to our sermon manuscripts in particular. Thomas Troeger, in *Imagining a Sermon*, summarizes what literate preaching is like. Troeger says that classical rhetoric dominated what he calls "the city of homiletical wisdom" and the result was predictable. According to Troeger, who teaches homiletics and communication at Iliff School of Theology in Denver [Troeger is now at Yale Divinity School], for many years sermons reflected not just classical rhetoric, but the literary age in which they were written. The following is

Troeger's summary of the characteristics of sermons in the last few centuries.<sup>17</sup> (For this paper I have taken the liberty of expanding, revising, and rearranging Troeger's assessment. I did this to include a number of points to which Troeger alludes in his book, but which he doesn't mention specifically in his list.)

- the logic of the outline;
- the clarity of the argument;
- the tightness of the transitions;
- the development of the main point;
- the persuasiveness of the supporting points;
- the compelling nature of the reasoning;
- the appropriateness of the illustrations to the principles they illuminated;
- the theological defensibility of the overall message.

When one finished a carefully crafted, literate sermon with all the characteristics mentioned above, none dared say, "*Au contraire!*" The preacher had clearly won the day, at least on the rational or intellectual level.

### ***B. The Secondarily Oral Age***

But we are no longer in the literate age, according to most observers of the communication landscape. Rather, we are in what some have called "the post-literate age" and others have termed "a secondarily oral age" or "an electronic culture." Tony Schwartz, who was a student of the celebrated Marshall McLuhan, explains what he and others mean when they speak of a post-literate age: "We have become a post-literate society. Electronic media rather than the printed word are now our major means of non-face-to-face communication."<sup>18</sup> Schwartz also points out that we are doing more and more anonymous or non-face-to-face communication today than direct, one-on-one communication. Walter Ong, the Jesuit priest who was also a student of McLuhan, coined the phrase "secondary orality" in the 1970's, and the term has stuck. The term refers to the electronically mediated mode of communication which our society seems to prefer, in contrast to the written or literary form of communication. It is not that people can't read today. It's just that television, cell phones, computers, the internet, CDs, DVDs, iPods, and other electronic media are the preferred ways of communicating and of disseminating or receiving information.

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas H. Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>18</sup>Tony Schwartz, *Media: The Second God* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 11.

We mentioned that Ong began to speak of secondary orality back in the 70's. He did this because he saw the proliferation of electronics at that time already. What would Ong, who passed away in 2003, say today? Richard Jensen, a Lutheran systematic theologian who has reflected and written on communication, dates the beginning of the post-literate age to the mid 80's—1985, to be exact. He says that “1985 is a year of significance in the shift of communications cultures.” He then explains: “1985 was the first year that more videocassettes were checked out/rented from video stores than there were books checked out of libraries.”<sup>19</sup> The exact time when we passed from one mode of communication to another is not that important. What is vital is that we, who are called to communicate the message of salvation, recognize that the world of communication has changed dramatically. How the world conveys information today is very different from the way it communicated forty years ago.

We should underscore that the proliferation and pervasiveness of electronic means of communication does not mean that people no longer read. Even though more videos (now DVDs) are bought or rented than library books are checked out, more books are being published than ever before. (Of course, one may adopt a Postmanesque<sup>20</sup> cynicism and ask whether the books are being read.) It is just that the preferred method of communication is now electronic. This is not only true when it comes to disseminating information generally. It also holds true in the halls of academia. To illustrate, the primary means of research for graduate students today is not the library, but the internet. And many people, especially in the business and financial worlds, receive most of their information via the computer. How we receive information and how we learn are being shaped by the electronic form of communication, and this has created what Ong calls the “secondarily oral age.”

That secondarily oral world is the world to which the Lord has sent you and me to preach the good news of redemption and reconciliation. We may not accept *in toto* Marshall McLuhan's thesis that society has always been shaped more by the nature of the media through which people communicate than by the content of the communication. But there is no denying the fact that our senses, responses, and even our ways of thinking have been profoundly impacted by the electronic impulses that bombard us daily in one form or another. Consider the different responses to multi-sensory stimuli by those who were trained

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<sup>19</sup>Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching to a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), p. 49.

<sup>20</sup>Ed. note: The reference is to culture critic Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death, End of Education*, etc.).

in the literacy era and by those who were reared in the age of secondary orality. Builders and Boomers—which means those of us who were born before 1964 or thereabout—“can only do one thing at a time,” as mothers sometimes tell their children clamoring for their attention. But the Busters and Bridgers can do their homework or read a novel while listening to their iPods, watching MTV, and taking calls on their smart phones. They can assimilate many more stimuli at once, because they process those stimuli differently than older generations do.<sup>21</sup>

One of the basic differences in the changing epistemology is the move from “left brain” to “right brain” communication. In the literacy age matters of faith were communicated in a rational and logical or left-brain manner. The goal of sermons was cognitive or didactic, and most sermons were about various points of Christian doctrine. These truths were presented in a structured, analytical style. They appealed to the left or logical side of the brain. With the advent of the secondarily oral age, however, communication broadened its approach and became more “right brain,” not just “left brain.”<sup>22</sup> Pierre Babin calls this broadened form of communication “stereo communication.”<sup>23</sup> By this Babin means communication that involves the dramatic use of images as well as reasoned arguments, with a preference for the imagistic and artistic. It is communication that appeals to the imagination as well as the intellect, communication that is aimed at the heart and feelings as much as the mind and reason. The conceptual language of the literary age of communication gives way to the imagistic and symbolic language of secondary orality.

## V. Communicating in a Secondarily Oral Age

How are we to respond to the shift in communication and learning that has taken place in the last quarter century? What difference, if any, should it make in the way we prepare and present our sermons?

It will be helpful to consider some of the basic characteristics of communication that targets the learners in our secondarily oral age.

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<sup>21</sup>Ed. note: For a contrary point of view on whether recent generations can truly “multi-task” (as opposed to whether they *think* they can) see John Medina, *Brain Rules* (online summary at <http://www.brainrules.net/pdf/summaries.pdf>). Particularly relevant is Medina’s Rule #4.

<sup>22</sup>Ed. note: To observe that neuroscientists consider popular notions of “right-brainedness” and “left-brainedness” to be much too simplistic in no way vitiates the author’s point. See Nielsen, J. A. et al., “An Evaluation of the Left-Brain vs. Right-Brain Hypothesis with Resting State Functional Connectivity Magnetic Resonance Imaging,” published August 14, 2013, <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0071275>.

<sup>23</sup>Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 36.

As you might expect, some of the characteristics were present in the oral age which preceded the literate age. However, we should not be misled by Ong's use of "oral" in his description of the present age as secondarily oral. The method by which people assimilate information today is not merely a repeat of how they learned and thought before the re-discovery of moveable type. The year 2007 is not simply 1407 *redivivus*. For one thing, the disseminating of words themselves is much different today than before Gutenberg, because that dissemination is often done electronically, not orally. What is more, there are so many more stimuli operating at the same time when people communicate through electronic means—visual as well as auditory, the stimuli of "beat" or rhythm along with other movement. It's not simply a pre-Gutenberg Oldsmobile with a new paint job or a souped-up hemi.

Following is a chart that points out the basic differences between communication in the literate age and in the electronic culture. (For convenience and as an easily remembered starting-point, I am following Jensen in using 1985 as the beginning of the post-literate age. Whether or not you accept that exact date is immaterial. What is important is that one recognizes that we have been living in a secondarily oral culture for at least twenty years.)

<i>Communicating in a Literate Culture</i>	<i>Communicating in an Electronic Culture</i>
1. Left brain communication: Logical	1. Right brain communication: Imaginative
2. Thinking in terms of ideas or concepts	2. Thinking in terms of narratives or stories
3. Linear development of ideas	3. Inductive and "discovery" approach
4. Emphasis on propositions or general truths	4. Interest in personal events and real-life situations
5. Presentation of ideas in an orderly, progressive way to convince the hearer	5. Teaches through a series of stories that "enroll" the hearer
6. Employs logic, analysis and argument	6. Uses discovery and resolution of conflict
7. Preference for metaphors of illustration	7. Reliance on metaphors of participation



As one compares these lists, he notices that there are several aspects of communication in an electronic culture that are significantly different from the way information is exchanged in a more literate age. First, there is the decided preference for instruction through stories instead of through carefully reasoned arguments. It is not that those in the electronic age are incapable of logical reasoning. Not at all. Their powers of analysis and argument are actually heightened in some areas since more of the brain is brought into play. But people in a post-literate age are more inclined to think in terms of narratives or stories. That is the approach toward which they most readily gravitate. Secondly, there is a marked proclivity for thinking through an issue or question step-by-step and arriving at a conclusion which the hearer himself discovers, not just one the speaker has announced in advance. Modern audiences respond more favorably to the inductive approach than the deductive, because they want to be involved in "discovering" the truth. They are more ready to accept a conclusion or to "own" a truth if they have been involved in arriving at that truth, rather than having it handed to them by fiat. Third, the audiences of today are more receptive to truth when they can assimilate that truth experientially, not just intellectually. The appeal of stories for today's learners is not just that they want to be amused or entertained, although that is present. A greater interest for modern hearers is that they step into a story and wrestle with and resolve on an emotional level the issues with which a story deals. For this reason metaphors of participation strike a more responsive chord than metaphors of illustration. A well-chosen illustration will usually get the hearer to nod his head and say, "I understand what you're saying." A story that engages the hearer on the emotional as well as the intellectual level will move that same hearer to say, "I agree with what you are saying." He will feel the lesson of your story, not just grasp it.

#### ***A. The Context of an Oral Presentation***

How do we respond to the shift in communication that has taken place the last couple of decades? It is obvious that the way to "touch" audiences today has changed significantly from the way a speaker could connect with an audience fifty or even twenty-five years ago. It is not our father's Oldsmobile that drives the modern generations. What difference will this make in the way we prepare and present our sermons?

Before we talk about the difference in a practical or nuts-and-bolts way, there are two more points that we need to make about communicating in our electronic age. In particular, we want to keep in mind that the context for our preaching is quite different from other forms of communicating with our members. In preaching we share an imme-

diacy, first of all. Both the pastor and people are physically present in the communication event we call worship, and they are interacting with each other on a physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual level. In the worship context, for example, what Aristotle calls the *ethos* or ethical character of the pastor as perceived by the congregation plays an important role. People are much more ready to accept the pronouncements of someone they respect and trust and feel has their best interests at heart. The old bromide, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," certainly applies in the context of preaching. When we have established ourselves as caring *Seelsorgers*, our congregations will be much more ready to accept what we say.

It is also important to note that in the immediacy of the worship context the physical aspects of the preacher's presentation loom large. This is doubly true in an age such as ours, that has moved from the literary to the sensory, particularly the visual. Some years ago Albert Mehrabian studied the impact that various aspects of an oral presentation have on the audience. According to Mehrabian, *what* we say is, in effect, far less important than *how* we say it. Mehrabian suggests the following percentages for the different aspects of a speaker's message:

- 7% of the total impact derives from its words (content);
- 38% of the total impact derives from vocal presentation (tone of voice);
- 55% of the total impact derives from non-verbal aspects (body language).<sup>24</sup>

We may dispute Mehrabian's percentages, especially since we proclaim the Word of God, which carries its convicting power as well as conveying its blessed, saving message. But those statistics remind us that how we communicate in an oral context affects the impact our message has on our audience. Our facial expressions, our gestures, and our tone of voice should be in harmony with what we are saying, be it law or gospel.

A second consideration that arises from the context of oral communication is the importance of the interdependence between the speaker and the hearers. It has been said that when a less-experienced speaker is approached to give a talk, he will usually ask, "What do you want me to talk about?" A veteran speaker, on the other hand, will ask, "To whom do you want me to talk?" The novice is often subject-oriented, while the veteran is more apt to be audience-oriented. Isn't this a good reminder to us? We are not called to preach. We are called to preach to God's people. We will want to be aware of that continually as we pre-

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<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: A Textbook for Homiletics* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), pp. 122-123.

pare our sermons. Each step of the way in our sermon preparation we will be thinking about those whom Christ redeemed for Himself and whom we are privileged to address in His name.

We can reflect our awareness of our audience both in the preparation of our sermons and in the presentation of them. When you have finished your text study, developed your propositional statement, formulated your theme and parts, and are ready to start writing, invite your audience into your study. As you sit at your computer, there should be a half a dozen representative members of the congregation gathered in front of you, at least in your mind. And you should explain and apply the sermon text in a way that will address the questions and speak to the concerns of these representatives of your congregation. Then, when your people gather on Sunday morning and listen to you preach, they will say, "He's been reading my mail!" Or they will ask, "Now how did he know that about me?" Our sermons should sound to each listener as if we're speaking directly to him or her—which we are, when we speak from a loving, pastoral heart!

We can maintain the interdependence between preacher and hearers when we speak our sermons to the congregation, not read them. The Greek word *homileo*, from which our English word homiletics comes, has the basic idea of conversing.<sup>25</sup> When you and I have a conversation with friends or even with casual acquaintances, we do not read from notes cards or rely on a manuscript. We maintain eye contact with them and we speak from our heart to their heart. That is even more important in the oral communication context of a worship service. Preachers who maintain eye contact with their hearers not only hold their hearers' attention much better, but they receive important visual feedback about their message. The reaction of your audience tells you if the sermon is clear or confusing, interesting or too intellectual, life-related or sleep-inducing. Speak your sermon in a natural, relaxed manner, speaking from your heart to your hearers' hearts about the loving heart of our gracious God.

### ***B. Characteristics of an Oral Presentation***

When we think about preaching, particularly preaching in a secondarily oral age, we need to recognize there is another, fundamental difference between oral learning and literary learning. When you are reading any document, you have an obvious but often unnoticed advantage: You have the opportunity to review, reflect and analyze—and to do so at your leisure. With a written document, you can go back and reread a section, not just once, but several times. In fact, you can

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<sup>25</sup>Souter, *op. cit.*, p. 175; cf. also Larsen, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

scroll through any section you want as often as you like. You can spend as much time as you choose on any given section. You can also take a break in your reading at any point to mull over what the writer has said. You have the luxury of thinking about what the writer says until you are satisfied you understand his point. Furthermore, you can isolate the writer's points one-by-one and examine them critically. You can see, for example, when he uses proper reasoning and cites appropriate authority and when he only makes an emotional or personal appeal. Literary communication offers the reader a number of important advantages.

Oral communication is considerably different. As someone has said, "It happens on the fly—and it happens quickly." When you listen to an oral presentation, you have to stay with the flow of continually moving ideas without the opportunity to ask questions or to pause for reflection. Oral presentations, particularly sermons, do not usually give the audience a chance to ask, "What did you mean by your second point?" or "Could you expand on what you said in part three?" The hearers have to work with the information the speaker gives, limited or inadequate though it may be. In addition, oral communication does not allow the audience to call, "Time out!" so it can process what the speaker has said to that point. The hearers are required to "keep moving," as it were, because the speaker is on to his next point—or the point after that. With one idea continually being added to another, the hearer does not have a chance to reflect on any of them. He must accept without reservation what the speaker is saying.

Those who have worked in the area of orality have suggested that, among other things, preachers should try to replicate the patterns of daily conversation when speaking. In fact, one man has suggested that "perhaps we should go for long walks, so that we talk our sermons through before we write them down." There may be value to his suggestion, particularly when we consider that—as noted above—the basic meaning of *homileo* is "to converse, to talk in an informal, intimate manner, to carry on a personal conversation." Sermonic style has, for the most part, moved away from the declamatory approach of earlier generations. But perhaps we could adapt an even more conversational style, especially in an age of secondary orality. We might think of the sermon not so much as one man making pronouncements from on high, but as leading a conversation with a group of people in the living room we call "the church."

## VI. A Sermonic Style for Today's Audience

What are the characteristics of a sermon that is intended specifically for a secondarily oral audience, not a primarily literate group of hearers?

Sermons that will speak to our modern audiences should be what we might call *TIMELY* sermons. They should have the characteristics or distinguishing features suggested by each of the letters in the word “timely.”

First of all, our sermons should always be thoroughly and clearly *textual* (T). When we open our mouth to speak in the pulpit, it should be clear to those in front of us that we have come to give them a message from God. Paul’s injunction to “preach the Word” (2 Ti 4:2) is a reminder that whatever we have to say is based on and flows from a portion of God’s Word. For one thing, it is the Word of the Lord—and only His Word!—that gives authority to what we say in a sermon. There is a vast difference between saying, “It seems to me . . .” or “In the considered opinion of many . . .” and proclaiming, “This is what the Lord says.” When we explain and apply the text we have chosen for that day, we can speak “as the oracles of God,” as Peter puts it (1 Pe 4:11). We can speak with the confidence and authority that the Lord’s Word gives to His spokesmen. And our audience will know it. They immediately recognize the difference between pious opinion and divine revelation.

Our goal in preaching is always to “open the Scriptures” to our hearers, just as Jesus did with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. And we should do so for the reasons those disciples gave. Do you remember their response after their encounter with Jesus on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus? They said, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road?” (Lk 24:32). When people leave church, their hearts should glow with the glorious truths of Jesus’ saving love that we have presented to them. They should, at the very least, understand more fully the text on which we preached. They should know that text better than they did before coming to church. We may not be able to teach anything new to those who are familiar with the Scriptures, but all our hearers should gain a new insight into the truth the text proclaims or they should have a fresh appreciation for the difference this truth makes in their lives. The fire of faith should burn in them more brightly after hearing the word of Scripture, warming their hearts as well as informing their minds.

The need for biblical preaching becomes clear when we realize how biblically illiterate our modern society has become. Americans don’t know their Bible. English teachers will tell you that. When a piece of literature they’re teaching quotes from Scripture or makes a scriptural allusion, the majority of students just don’t get it. Even the basic facts of the Bible are not well-known to many today, including Christians. One of George Barna’s recent surveys brought this out very clearly: Barna found that 60% of Americans can’t name five of the Ten Commandments; 58% of adults don’t know who preached the Sermon on the Mount (most of them thought Billy Graham did!); 50% of

high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife; and 12% of Christian adults think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. In an age in which we supposedly know more and more about a greater number of things, the one thing about which our society knows very little is the Bible. That reason alone compels us to preach textual, Bible-based sermons. Our hearers will derive no comfort from the wonderful works of God nor live according to the guiding will of God if they do not know what His Word teaches. Paul could have been talking about our age, not his first-century society, when he asked, "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Ro. 10:14). Our biblically illiterate age calls for sermons that carefully explain a portion of God's Word.

When we faithfully proclaim the Word through Bible-based sermons, that Word will touch hearts and change lives, which is another compelling reason we want to preach truly textual sermons. The Holy Spirit has graciously bound Himself to the Word, as we mentioned before, and this is assuring to any preacher. We referred previously to Paul's determination to know nothing among the Corinthians "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Co 2:2). Paul made that decision so his preaching would not be "with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (v. 3). The proclamation of the Gospel is not a mere recital of human words, but the vehicle by which the Holy Spirit brings His power to work on human hearts (1 Th 1:5), calling them to faith (2 Th 2:14) and building them up in faith and love (1 Th 1:3-8). Through the seemingly simple, yes, foolish message of the Gospel the Holy Spirit causes us to be born again (1 Pe 1:23) and strengthens us in the inner man to every good work (Eph 3:16). It is essential, therefore, that our sermons be textual, giving us the authority of God and bringing our hearers under the convicting power of the Spirit.

A sermon that resonates with the electronic culture will also be *imagistic* (I). Today's society prefers images to propositions and symbols to analysis. Consider the daily bombardment of images to which your hearers are subjected, whether it be by the billboards and signs along the freeway, by the ads in magazines and on television, by the multiple images of the MTV-type programs, or by the visual stimuli of the internet. When you think of how constant that bombardment is, you can understand why Tex Sample finds three approaches that characterize our "electronic age," which is his term for Ong's "secondarily oral age." Sample says that our modern audiences are drawn to and influenced by images, beat, and visualization.<sup>26</sup> Images, according to

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<sup>26</sup>Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 24-27.

Sample, have a “rich peculiarity” or special way of engaging us with the world which they represent. These images not only imprint themselves on our minds, but they make us part of the world we thought we were merely observing. Without our being aware of it, these images draw us into the world they create and make us part of it. The visualization of today’s message, which is often accompanied by music or “sound as beat,” to use Sample’s phrase, increases the impact of that message. Our ears reinforce what our eyes see, and we assimilate on both the conscious and intuitive level whatever message is being presented to us. Our society has not only been trained to expect communication to take the form of images and visualization; it also learns through that approach.

We who are charged with proclaiming the message of Scripture have been given the very tool that equips us to approach today’s electronic culture in a meaningful way. Consider how image-rich the Scriptures are! Is there a page—no, a single verse—that does not create a scene, paint a picture, or hold up an image to you? Even the shortest verse in the Bible does—and dramatically! The two languages the Holy Spirit used to record the inspired writings present picture after picture for our consideration. And these pictures and scenes are not limited to the skillful narratives, which make up seventy-five percent of the Old Testament and over half of the New. The poetic books of the Old Testament are replete with images, as are the prophetic writings. The smallest verses and the most seemingly casual expressions contain unforgettable pictures. What is more, individual words, such as “redemption” and “atonement,” “justification” and “sanctification” are pictures just waiting to be held up to the congregation. We want to hold up these scriptural images so they can be imprinted on the hearts and minds of our hearers.

When we study a text, then, it is important that we listen to that text—really listen, listen to exactly what it says, listen to how it says it. In our text study, for example, we will want to be aware of both the “color” and the “flavor” of that text. By “color” we mean the picturesque quality of the words, the image contained in the word or the scene the word evokes. Consider, by way of illustration, the Greek word for “bought” that Paul uses when he tells us, “You were bought at a price” (1 Co 6:20). The word the apostle employs literally means “buy in the marketplace.” The people of Corinth lived in a city of 650,000 people, 400,000 of whom were slaves. The Corinthians could not hear Paul’s words without thinking of the slaves they saw being bought and sold almost daily in their city. What an unforgettable picture this one word imprints on the minds of those who understand it, whether we’re talking about people in first-century Corinth or twenty-first century California. The picture that comes across in that

colorful word helps us understand why Paul says, “You are not your own” (1 Co 6:19). And the careful exegete will find pictures like that in almost every verse of Scripture.

In addition to using the “color” or picturesque quality of a text, the preacher will want to bring out the “flavor” of a text. We use the word “flavor” to denote the predominant characteristic or the distinctive emphasis in a text. To illustrate what we mean, think of two texts which discuss the same subject, Romans 8:28-39 and Ephesians 1:3-12. Both of these texts show us the grand panorama of God’s plan for our salvation, which literally stretches from eternity on one side to eternity on the other. That sight almost takes our breath away, especially as we see that God has carefully laid out each step in our salvation, beginning with our election. But those two texts, while both discussing election, do not say the same thing about that choosing which took place in eternity before the world began. Each text has its special flavor or point of emphasis. In Romans Paul refers to our election to assure us that God, who chose us to be His own, will make everything in life work toward the fulfillment of His saving plan until we are “glorified.” In Ephesians Paul again talks about election, but there he focuses on the gracious character of God’s electing us. He shows that we, who are so undeserving, can be absolutely confident we are the elect of God, because our election was entirely by grace. Each of these passages—like all of Scripture—has its special flavor or distinctive emphasis, and sermons should reflect that flavor along with the color of the passage.

The third characteristic of a *TIMELY* sermon is that it will be **multi-sensory** (M). The preaching event is an oral presentation by the speaker, it is true, but it should not be only an aural experience for the hearers. Consider preaching from the perspective of the audience: They listen while we speak. But there is much more at work during the course of a sermon than sound waves striking the ear drum. Of course, the preacher’s speaking is a major component in the presentation of a sermon, and we may want to give that more consideration than we sometimes do. For some of us the chief concern after the sermon has been written and revised is the memorization of it. And we consider ourselves “ready to preach” once we have committed the sermon to memory or when we have mastered our manuscript enough that we will be able to speak freely on Sunday. Few of us consider the rhetorical aspects of our proclamation—enunciation, emphasis, volume, intonation, cadence, pace and pauses. But because preaching is primarily an oral-aural event, we do well to spend at least an hour on Saturday deciding what the most effective way of speaking each portion of the sermon would be.

Do you need to be convinced of the value in giving the oral aspects of preaching greater consideration? Go back and re-read Mehrabian’s



percentages for the different parts of an oral presentation—content, voice, and body language. You may recall that he said that 38% of the total impact of a speaker's message derives from the vocal presentation. Thirty-eight percent! Can our audience hear what we say? Is the sound of our voice generally pleasant? Do we speak with the volume and force that are appropriate to the subject? We should not mumble the Law; nor should we whine or shout the Gospel. We want to speak the former firmly and forcefully and the latter in an inviting, winsome manner. Do we vary our pitch and volume? Do we strive for variety in our pace and cadence? Or could someone track our sentences on an oscilloscope and point out that they all have the same predictable pattern? Since the primary sense the preacher addresses through a sermon is the ear, he will want to consider how he can use his voice in a way that will speak in an effective and engaging manner. Effective use of one's voice is, interestingly enough, multi-sensory, because the listener reacts to the speaker on several different levels—physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual.

Another part of the multi-sensory approach is the speaker's physical presentation, including both his appearance and carriage. Mehrabian says that 55% of the total impact of a message derives from the non-verbal aspects, what we call body language. You may struggle with this percentage on theological grounds, and that is understandable. After all, we hold to the supernatural working of the Word, as well as the psychological. So that percentage may not be accurate when it comes to proclaiming the Word of God. And yet, because we acknowledge the psychological working of the Word, it is appropriate to consider what message our audience gets from our physical appearance and our body language. In particular, we will want to match the verbal and non-verbal aspects of our message. For instance, when we are preaching the Law and the horrible consequences of all who sin against it, we do not want to do so with a satisfied smile on our face or with an open-handed gesture of indifference. By the same token, when our voice says, "God loves you," our scowling brow and our stern mouth should not be shouting in contradiction, "Not really!" Being aware of the importance of a multi-sensory presentation will lead us to match the tone of our voice and the appearance of our body to the content of our message.

Nor is it just the verbal aspect of a sermon that deserves attention. Not everyone in the congregation on a given Sunday is going to be an auditory learner. Some may be more visually-oriented, others more kinesthetic learners, and still others more reflective or interpersonal in their learning style. The effectiveness of a sermon can be increased, at least from the learning perspective, if we are sensitive to different learning styles and reflect that in the way we present the sermon.

Might we consider more visual aids in our services? This does not mean we have to bombard the hearers' ocular nerves and put their occipital lobe on overload. But taking our cue from the Master Teacher, we may want to use more visual aids in our services generally and in our sermons particularly. The old adage about one picture being worth a thousand words may, at the very least, make us aware of those listeners who are visual learners. And making available a sermon outline with fill-in blanks will not only engage the visual learners, but also those who are kinesthetic learners, that is, those who learn best when they do something physical as part of the learning process. What is more, judicious use of music can be effective with some aural learners, who process information best when it is accompanied by music. We can use music both as a quiet, supporting background for part of the sermon or as an integral part of the teaching process when we ask the congregation to sing lyrics that reinforce the message and involve the audience.

There are a number of ways we can make our message more multi-sensory, and we might want to consider incorporating one or two of them in each sermon. At the same time, may we offer a two-fold caution? The style of the sermon, especially making it multi-sensory, should not be enhanced at the expense of the substance of the sermon. Electronic pyrotechnics in the pulpit are not a substitute for careful exegesis in the study. Any visual or auditory aids we use in our sermons should be what Luther long ago termed music—"the handmaid of theology." A good slide or picture, a moving or energizing piece of music or the creative use of congregational movement should always be subservient to what we—no, to what the Lord—is saying through the sermon. A multi-sensory sermon is not designed to demonstrate our cleverness, but to declare the depths of God's love for lost sinners. And the corollary is that we are not to spend so much time working up our slide show that we don't delve into the depths of God's Word. It is very easy to blast off into cyberspace on an extended search for appropriate pictures and to return to the study after that trip with very little time left for a careful exegesis of God's Word. The electronic servant dare not become the homiletical master.

Those who preach to people who have been raised in an electronic culture will also want to craft sermons that are *experiential* (E), the characteristic of a *TIMELY* sermon that we may not have given much thought. Most of us have been trained to construct deductive or propositional sermons, as we said previously. We see the primary objective of the sermon as didactic, that is, as a way to teach the congregation the wonderful truths of God's Word. (This holds true of other aspects of our work as pastors as well, particularly confirmation class, adult information classes and Bible classes.) We aim for cognitive learning, and when we are finished preaching, we want the people to know bet-

ter the main truth or chief point of the text on which our sermon was based. As a result, our sermons are long on analysis and explanation. Do a quantitative analysis of your five most recent sermons. If you are a typical WELS preacher, you will find that your sermons are approximately 65% exposition and 35% appropriation-application. What is more, for the most part our illustrations are primarily designed to help our hearers understand better the points we are making. We search for comparisons, analogies, and illustrations that make a certain truth clear to the audience.

Without denigrating the expository aspect of sermonizing, we would ask you to consider leading your hearers to experience what you are explaining. The exposition of a sermon aims for the head, and that is an appropriate target. And yet, that is not our only target when we unfold the truths of God. The psalmist said, "I will run in the way of Your commandments, (O Lord), For You shall enlarge my heart" (Ps 119:32). "Heart" here does only refer to the psalmist's intellectual understanding. It also includes his emotional response to God's love. This becomes clear when we see that Isaiah uses the same words when he says, "Your hearts shall swell with joy" (Isa 60:5) as God's love gathers more and more people to Him. Through preaching (as well as through teaching) we strive for affective learning along with cognitive learning. We aim for the heart as well as the head. Or to put it another way, we want our hearers to experience the truth of what we are saying as well as understand that truth.

One of the most effective ways to move our hearers is through the use of story. Stories have a power that we may not always appreciate. For one thing, a good story can arouse and hold the interest of the congregation. Think of what happens when you insert a story in your sermon. The moment you say, "That reminds me of the time . . .," heads are raised, eyes become brighter and people may even lean forward to make sure they catch what you are saying. But more than that, an effective story can touch the heart in a way no explanation can, no matter how elaborate or exact the explanation may be. Think of stories you have told in your sermons—stories you added almost as an afterthought or told rather casually. Do you remember your surprise to see that, when you finished the story, some of the ladies were dabbing their eyes and some of the men were swallowing hard? Or do you recall, after another story, that there was absolute silence in the church because people were so moved by your story—a silence no one wanted to break? A good story not only grabs the attention of the hearers; it also touches their emotions. Through the use of stories you can help the congregation experience what your sermon teaches.

As an aside, I would like to offer a brief comment about the use of personal experiences or stories involving your family members: Don't!

I realize that it has become popular to share a personal story with the congregation or to illustrate a certain point with something that happened to one of our children. That supposedly makes us more “transparent,” whatever that means. It is also supposed to make us more approachable to the congregation, demonstrating that we’re “one of them.” But a person can say about using one’s personal experiences what some wag said about excessive use of alliteration in a sermon: Three things can happen—and four of them are bad! David Buttrick and others have done extensive research about the pastor’s use of personal experiences, and the result is not encouraging for those who feel constrained to open their lives to the congregation. For one thing, those stories apparently stop the flow of the sermon in the hearer’s mind, instead of being part of it. The pastor’s personal experiences are not viewed by the hearers as part of the movement of the sermon. What is more, according to Buttrick, such stories tend to sidetrack the audience. They lead the hearers to start thinking about other aspects of the pastor’s life, and as a result, the congregation tends to go off on its own, pursuing those thoughts for a while.<sup>27</sup> So once again, may I give you a word of counsel? Don’t! We know your children are especially cute, your wife is exceptionally \_\_\_\_\_ (You fill in the blank), and your experiences are unique and interesting (at least to you). But don’t share them! Save them for pastoral conferences. Don’t do anything that interrupts or distracts from the proclamation of the Word.

Another way to make the sermon more experiential is by using the inductive approach. Induction is an effective technique for drawing the hearers into the discussion of the sermon. One of the objectives pastors strive for in a sermon is to raise the questions the congregation is asking or to give voice to the issues with which they’re struggling. When we use the inductive approach in dealing with those questions and issues, we force the congregation in a good sense to become involved in working towards a resolution. The deductive approach gives the answer at the start. It states the basic premise or central truth with which the sermon is going to deal and then it explains or elaborates on different aspects of that truth and shows the implications (we call them “applications”) for the lives of the hearers. In a deductive presentation the congregation does not have to be as involved in struggling with the text. The audience may be more passive, quietly accepting what the speaker says because he is, after all, “the expert on these matters.” The inductive approach, by contrast, works with the particulars of the text, asking questions the text raises, exploring this possibility and that, and then arriving at a ten-

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<sup>27</sup>David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structure* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 141-143.

tative or partial conclusion. The inductive sermon will repeat this process a number of times until it has dealt with the different issues or points the text makes and comes to its general truth on the basis of its partial conclusions. By starting with an issue or concern of the hearers and by asking a series of questions and discussing several tentative solutions before arriving at the final conclusion, the inductive approach gets the hearers involved throughout the sermon. The audience experiences the sermonic process for itself, participating in the intellectual process that eventually leads to the inevitable conclusion or general truth the sermon text teaches.

It may be profitable to note, as an aside, that there is a considerable amount of confusion about the inductive approach, and, as a result, there are some who are uncomfortable in using that methodology. In homiletical circles the confusion may be traceable to Fred Craddock, whose seminal work, *As One Without Authority*, appeared thirty-five years ago. This book began what is called “the new homiletic” and it promoted and popularized the inductive approach. Unfortunately, Craddock was not entirely accurate in his characterization of induction. Induction as a form of reasoning was first given written expression by Aristotle in his work, *Rhetoric*. (Aristotle also spelled out the principles of deductive reasoning, which he called the syllogism in logic and the enthymeme in rhetoric.) Another name Aristotle used for induction was the example. But regardless of what he termed this form of reasoning, Aristotle stated that those who follow the logic of induction will arrive at a definite conclusion. While—in contrast to the deductive method—the conclusion of induction may seem more probable than inevitable, there is a definite conclusion nevertheless. Unfortunately, Craddock and others he has influenced do not feel that preachers who use the inductive method should arrive at a clear or certain conclusion. They should approach the text through induction, but, to quote Craddock, they should resist the temptation to announce the conclusion or to make the application of the text. Craddock feels preachers should leave that for the hearers themselves, which is why Craddock titled his first book *As One Without Authority*.<sup>28</sup>

There are some in our circles who feel they cannot use induction because of what Craddock says about it. We can understand their reservations, but we would encourage them to direct those reservations at Craddock’s interpretation of induction, not at the inductive method itself. Our Lord used induction, and Paul framed many of his arguments that way. But when either Jesus or Paul employed induc-

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<sup>28</sup>Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 64.

tive reasoning, they led their hearers to a definite conclusion. Induction can be used by those who would speak “as one having authority.”

In this context, we might also mention that the misunderstanding about induction that Craddock seems to have generated has a parallel in the misconceptions—which can be traced to Leonard Sweet—about abduction, a term for another form of reasoning or sermon construction. Sweet promotes abduction, but his public expressions of what he understands by abduction do not represent what logicians or philosophers teach about that form of reasoning. According to Sweet, abduction means spinning a story this way and that way and another way and seeing what people make of it and how they will respond to it.<sup>29</sup> Charles Sanders Pierce, who coined the term abduction in the nineteenth century, did not mean tossing out little stories and seeing what will stick with one’s audience. Rather, by abduction Pierce meant a form of reasoning whereby a hypothesis or possible explanation is offered for observable and often surprising or inexplicable phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Once again, just as with deduction and induction, abduction leads to a conclusion. The conclusion may not be inevitable as a deductive conclusion or as probable as an inductive conclusion, but it is definitely a conclusion—and the most likely conclusion, based on the facts or phenomena that are available to the observers. Abduction does not shun conclusions or avoid applications.

To return to our discussion of a *TIMELY* sermon, we should note that its fifth characteristic is that it is *life-related* (L). When we say that, please be clear on what we mean. You should not immediately assume we are suggesting that the sermon is to focus primarily on sanctification or “principles for daily living.” That is the emphasis in many of the growing community churches in our area and in the mega-churches whose services you can watch on television. Instead of offering “How-to” sermons (“How to get along with your spouse;” “How to achieve financial independence;” etc.), we are to preach “What-is” sermons (“What is our true condition and our greatest need here on earth?” “What is God’s solution to those needs and His way of changing our condition?”). In other words, a sermon that speaks to our present age at the deepest, most meaningful level will proclaim Law and Gospel—and proclaim both clearly.

Only the Law in its use as a mirror can lay bare the sinful human heart and show how hideous our conduct is when we move away from

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<sup>29</sup>Leonard Sweet et al., *A Is for Abductive* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 31-38. Cf. also Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), *passim*.

<sup>30</sup>Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: Tyndale Press, 1971), pp. 145-146.

the will of God. That is why we need to preach the Law both explicitly and specifically. Clear Law preaching reflects the Lord's own assessment of us and our congregation: "From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores" (Isa 1:6). Our society does not merely need a sanctified pep talk, a slight attitude adjustment, or a boost to its sagging self-esteem. It needs to be shown, first of all, how sin-sick it is and how desperate its situation. We need to be explicit in our preaching of Law, clearly confronting sin and showing its deadly consequences. We also need to be specific in our proclamation of the Law, focusing on the sins of those before us, instead of "the big, bad world out there." We need to emphasize that the sins we commit separate us from God and hide His face from us. As our hearers listen to us proclaim the Law, they should be moved to confess in humility, "He's talking about me—just about me." And when we finish preaching the Law, every mouth in the audience should be stopped and every person should realize that he or she is guilty before God (Ro. 3:19).

Your sermon this coming Sunday is not to stand on one leg, however, thundering only Law. Or, to change the image, the goal of your sermon is not to give your congregation its weekly, pious pummeling by "whuppin' them up with the Law." We only preach Law that we might then proclaim Gospel—and proclaim it as sweetly and tenderly as we know how. The heads that are bowed under the verdict of the Law will be lifted up when they hear the comfort of the Gospel, and the hearts the Law has bruised will find soothing relief in the balm of the Good News. In our sermons we don't merely make a little time at the end to speak Jesus' redeeming work as Savior. We are eager to get to that message, even as we are preaching the Law. We're barely able to restrain ourselves or contain our joy in showing our hearers that heart beyond compare. And the Gospel, too, will be a message we preach explicitly and specifically. We will show our audience in clear, precise detail both the active and passive obedience of our Lord so there is no doubt that He finished His redemptive work. We will be specific in assuring each person before us that all his sins have been forgiven and he is truly at peace with God. When we finish preaching the Gospel, our audience should say as one, "I've never heard anything sweeter or more comforting than the story about Jesus. I was so moved by it, it was as if I was hearing it for the first time. I just can't wait to tell others about it." Life-related sermons fill the hearers with the joyous message of peace and forgiveness through Jesus.

Another aspect of life-related preaching is that it personalizes the preaching of Law and Gospel. By this we mean that life-related sermons will give a sufficient amount of time to what we usually call appropriation and application. We want each hearer to make the

Gospel his own, as it were—to draw that sweet message to his heart and to revel in its joy. We also want our audience to respond to the Gospel in gratitude, which means we will include specific applications of the Law in its third use in our sermons. And this is an area where we might be able to improve the “timely” character of our preaching. While we sometimes criticize the community churches for being all Law and no Gospel, have we gone too far the other way and preached the Gospel at the expense of the third use of the Law? Our hearers are not only asking us, “What does this text say?” and, “What does this text mean?” both of which we’re good at answering. They also wonder, “What does this mean to me in my daily life?” Our preaching will be much more “timely” or “relevant” when our members see how the message impacts their lives tomorrow morning.

The final characteristic of *TIMELY* sermons is that they are *yoking* (Y), that is, they consciously strive to establish and strengthen the yoke or bond that joins us to our Savior and to others with whom we are united in faith. This is not an aspect that we often emphasize in our preaching or on which we consciously focus. We may touch on it at times. We obviously deal with the unity we enjoy with Christ and His people when we are discussing the *Una Sancta*. And we will treat it when we are expounding passages that tell us we are all the children of God by faith in Jesus. But the yoke of true fellowship—first with our Lord Jesus and then through Him with all believers—is not something that we stress in our sermons as often or as much as we might.

We want to consider making our sermons more “yoking” because that is one of the deepest longings of the postmodern generations. We are all acquainted with the high incidence of divorce in our country, which has reached close to forty percent. Many in the two younger generations are children of broken homes. In addition, we are seeing a continuation of the breakdown of the family and of family life generally. You would probably be surprised, for example, if you did a statistical analysis of your congregation to see what percent come from fractured families. As a result of the “diverse” or unstable family units from which the Busters and Bridgers come, there is an increasing sense of “disconnect” and isolation. Out of that feeling of separation there is an earnest yearning to be part of a solid, stable family, which is exactly what we in the church are able to offer in Christ.

Preaching that is yoking will speak of the sense of community—or, even better, the sense of family—that is ours through Jesus. We can assure the most forgotten or forlorn, “You are a precious child of God, redeemed by the blood of His Son and restored to full sonship in His family.” A story such as the parable of the prodigal son, which should really be retitled as “The Parable of the Waiting Father” (Lk 15:20), will warm the heart and still the longing of



those who are looking for acceptance. And think of what it will mean to those who wonder if they're really important to hear that Jesus Himself is not ashamed to call them His brothers (Heb 2:11). What is more, we can communicate the unity and loving concern that each member of Christ's family has for every other family member. That will speak volumes to a society in which one of the deepest concerns is the loss of identity and an attendant feeling that they don't belong. We can assure souls who feel they are adrift or who think they don't matter that by God's grace they are part of the inner circle of our Lord. They are among His chosen family, yes, one of His dear brothers or sisters.

### VII. Letting the Text Control the Sermon

Sometimes, when we're discussing our preparation for a sermon, we talk about "working with a text." Might a change of prepositions be in order? Instead of talking about working *with* a text, wouldn't it be more appropriate to talk about working *under* a text? After all, who's doing the shaping and molding—the preacher or the text? Is a text on which we intend to preach like a piece of clay in our hands that we mold and shape until we have formed a sermon out of it? Or is it the other way around? Are we the ones whom the text molds and shapes, and then, when it has done its work on us, sends us forth with its message from God in our hearts and on our lips? If we could be honest with each other, we would probably have to admit that in our sermonizing over the years we have won more of the wrestling matches with the text than it has won. It's sad, but true that we often shape texts into the sermonic form we think they should have, rather than letting the texts mold us and our sermon.

Our re-forming the text to suit our sermonic needs may be especially true when we are preaching on narrative texts. I venture to say that any pastor here worth his stole can take a narrative selection from either the Old or New Testament, put it into his homiletical blender, set the blender on puree, and at the end of the week have a propositional sermon to serve to the congregation, usually a sermon with two parts. And if you have made real progress in your homiletical journey, your sermons on narrative passages have the "ideal" three-points-and-a-poem structure.

May I suggest that we might want to reexamine how we structure our sermons? Instead of forcing a text into whatever homiletic mold we are using, why not let the text itself dictate the structure of the sermon? The Holy Spirit was very intentional in inspiring different genre and literary types in Scripture. Would it not be wise on our part to notice the way the Spirit has structured a text and then reflect both the movement and the mood of that text in our sermon?

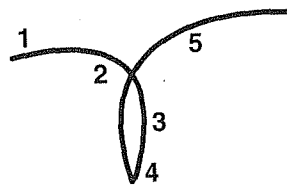
Wouldn't that be a better way of "expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (and forms)?"

### A. Reflecting the Narrative Structure of a Text

Our sermons should reflect the structure of the text especially when we are preaching on narrative texts. We mentioned before that narratives resonate with audiences in our secondarily oral age. But it is the narrative form our hearers appreciate, not narrative re-formed and recast as propositional or deductive presentation. When we are preaching on narrative texts, which make up the majority of Scripture, remember: our sermons should follow and reflect the structure of the text on which we are preaching. The text should control the sermon, not the other way around.

To let the narrative structure of a text control the movement and mood of our sermon, we may have to sensitize ourselves to the subtleties of scriptural story-telling. In that connection Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is still helpful, even though it has been in print for twenty-five years.<sup>31</sup> There is also an explanation and diagram of the structure of biblical narrative in *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* by Sidney Greidanus.

A recent work that speaks directly to preaching on biblical narrative is Eugene Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot*. Lowry suggests a four-part structure in biblical narrative that can easily be reflected in the sermon structure and that also lends itself very well to sound Law-Gospel preaching. Lowry's "loop," as he calls it, charts the movement of biblical narratives in the following way:



(Note: Lowry's recent works on his "loop" have only four parts. This was the only diagram I could find on the internet of his "loop.")

The four parts that Lowry sees in the "plot" or structure of a biblical narrative are : 1) an initiating conflict; 2) a further complication; 3) a sudden reversal (brought about by the Gospel); 4) the experiencing (or the unfolding of) the Gospel. This allows for clear Law-Gospel sermons.

If one were to structure a sermon on Mark 5:21-24a,35-43 (the raising of Jairus' daughter), using Lowry's "plot," it might employ the following pattern:

"Only Believe!"

1. In the One Who Can Truly Help, 21-23.
2. When All Hope Seems Gone, 24,35.

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<sup>31</sup>Ed. note: Other useful resources include *Narrative Art in the Bible* by Shimon Bar-Efrat and *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* by Meir Sternberg.

3. Because of the Promise Jesus Gives, 36,38-40a.

4. In Response to His Great Blessings, 40b-42.

This is not the only way or necessarily the best way to put together a sermon on this text. However, this structure has the advantage of maintaining the movement of the inspired text. In addition, with such a structure the preacher is able to reflect more faithfully the mood or atmosphere in the different “moves” of the text. In short, he can let the text work with him and dictate how he will present this story, rather than his re-working the text and presenting it in a traditional deductive way that does not take into consideration the narrative structure in which the text is framed.

### ***B. Learning from the African-American Tradition***

One of the ways we can improve the way we preach narrative texts is by studying the sermons of African-American preachers. Narrative sermons have held central place in African-American preaching for most of the four-century pilgrimage of African-Americans in this country. This has been true because traditional black preaching has been very biblical and has especially focused on the stories of Scripture. There is a great deal that we can learn from the way an African-American preacher delivers a sermon on a biblical narrative. He doesn't just preach the story in the traditional sense. He relives the story himself, and by his skillful reliving of the story he draws his audience into the story with him, and his listeners experience that story for themselves. Through the preacher they're “inside the story,” as it were, and they go through the incidents of the narrative and feel the emotions the characters feel.<sup>32</sup>

There are a number of lessons we can draw from African-American story-telling. The first is setting the scene for the story. Black preachers are excellent at giving a feel for where an incident takes place and what the mood was like. In addition, the African-American preachers spend a lot of time on characterization. Often when you listen to a black preacher, it isn't long before you think you know the people in the text he's talking about. Part of the genius of African-American preaching is the skillful use of dialogue. Many black preachers are very creative in this respect. They do not merely recount what happens in a story in the “and-then-and-then-and-then” style. Rather, they re-create what the different characters said, giving their audience the distinct impression that they are listening to the conversation exactly as it took place in the text under study. Through the

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990) and Frank A Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997).

role-playing of the preacher, the listeners come to understand the mood and mannerisms of a given personality in the story. The preachers allow themselves a considerable amount of license in order to recreate the story as they understand it, but in no way does this militate against a commitment to the Bible as God's inspired Word or an earnest effort to be faithful to the text.

In African-American preaching there are a patience and a sense of pace or timing that we do well to consider. The old adage, "Start low, go slow, aim high, strike fire" catches the way a black preacher will deliver his sermon. His delivery is very slow at the beginning, deliberately so. In fact, there is an intentional hesitation on the preacher's part, especially at the onset. This hesitation, along with the skillful use of repetition and catchy expressions or pithy sayings, plays to the audience and gets them more involved. This involvement shows itself in what has been called "the hum" of black preaching, that is, the vocal response of the congregation to the pastor's preaching. Black preachers not only expect that response, they rely on it and work off it. As the preacher moves through his sermon, he will pick up the vocal pace as he approaches the conclusion.

It is the conclusion, along with the art of telling the story, that may be most instructive for our preaching. Most conclusions in African-American preaching sound a note of hope and celebration, emphasizing not only who God is and what He has done for us in the Savior, but what He will do in our lives today. This celebratory note is not mere emotionalism, although it does aim for an affective response. Someone has termed celebratory preaching a "theology of thanksgiving honed on the peripheral, jagged edges of life." Much of the black community has felt disenfranchised and disenchanting—two of the predominant sentiments among those in the postmodern generation as well. The African-American sermon, culminating on a note of hope and celebration, affirms God's unfailing love for His people and assures them of His continuing presence in their lives—themes that will resonate with many in modern society. Celebratory sermons lift up the hearers before they send them off!

There is, then, much that we can learn from African-American preaching about reaching modern audiences: the art of telling The Story, techniques for involving the congregation, and the importance of striking a celebratory note.

### **VIII. Techniques for Engaging the Congregation**

How can we preach a *TIMELY* sermon that applies in our congregational culture some of the strengths of the African-American culture and some of the techniques of the new homiletic? For example, what are some of the ways we can engage our congregation more

actively, as do African-American preachers? What little changes might we make in our style to transform the sermon from a monologue into a conversation, from a preacher-oriented activity into an audience-involving experience?

One of the most obvious and simplest techniques is the use of the question, both rhetorical and actual. Think of how often our Lord uses questions in His discourses. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, He asks questions almost from the very beginning. After giving what we call the Beatitudes, Jesus personalizes His lesson by telling His listeners, "You are the salt of the earth," that is, they are to have a preserving, purifying, and enriching influence on the people with whom they come in contact. Then our Lord asks the question, "But if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned" (Matt. 5:13)? The regular use of rhetorical questions—"Did you catch what Jesus says?" "Do you see what this means to us today?" "Can you believe that?"—draw the hearers into the conversation and invite them to wrestle with the issues a text raises.

But we do not have to restrict our questions to those that are rhetorical in nature. Why not let the congregation answer the questions you raise? Our Lord did. When a lawyer asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life, our Lord answered the man's question with a question of His own, as He often did. He asked, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10: 26). Then Jesus waited for the man to answer. We can use a similar technique. Frame a simple, easy-to-answer question. Perhaps it will be about a biblical fact that the majority of the audience will know: "Where was the promised Savior to be born?" Or it could be about a point of doctrine that even the younger children in the congregation could respond to: "Why do we need a Savior?" We can ask those questions and then give the members a chance to answer, initially encouraging their response by calling on a junior high student you've tipped off ahead of time or by pointing to a member you've alerted in advance.

When we ask questions, especially questions that require a little reflection, we will want to give our audience a moment or two to think about the question and to formulate an answer. Recall when people asked Jesus about the Galileans who were killed in the temple while they came to offer sacrifices to the Lord. Our Lord's initial response was a question, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered such things" (Luke 13:2)? In the next verse Jesus goes on, "I tell you, 'No!'" and then lays out the lesson we are to learn from that tragic incident. But there certainly must have been a pause between Jesus' question and His follow-up—time enough for the people to formulate their opinions and perhaps even nod their heads in affirmation. In the same

way, we do well to pause after certain questions we raise and give the congregation a chance to answer the questions mentally before we give the answer to them. That way of using questions engages the members in the conversation of the sermon.

Another way to engage the hearers is by using a variation of what Jesus did with the young lawyer who asked what he had to do to earn heaven. Jesus had the man quote from the Scriptures. That is what our Lord's questions called the man to do (cf. Lk 10:26-27). We can do something similar in our sermons. We can ask people to recite a well-known passage that makes the point we're stressing: "And what does Jesus tell us about God's love in John 3:16? Who can recite that passage?" Or we might ask them to finish a passage we begin: "You know those comforting words of Paul, don't you: 'All things work together . . .'? Can you finish that for me?" Or we might ask the congregation to say with us a passage we start: "What assurance we draw about our Lord's unfailing love from these words of Jeremiah, 'I have loved you'—say it with me!—'with an everlasting love.'" Asking our members to recite or finish or say with us words of Scripture can draw them into the sermonic conversation in a personal way.

Another technique for engaging our audience is movement—both on their part and ours. Pulpits are often confining and do not lend themselves to movement by the pastor, so it may be difficult for you to move around the chancel. But just a little movement on the pastor's part—a few steps to the right or left, a step or two forward or backward—catches the attention of the audience and engages them more fully without their realizing it. That is also true when the pastor asks the congregation to look at something in the church, be it the baptismal font, the cross above the altar, or even the people on either side of them. That simple, physical activity requires a subtle but effective involvement of people who might otherwise be passive or detached. Think of Jesus' parable on the sower and the seed (Mt. 13:3-9). Isn't it likely that while our Lord told the parable He was pointing to a man planting a field in view of Jesus' audience?

Visual aids are generally an effective way to involve an audience. The Master Teacher showed that in His frequent use of parables. What are the parables but vivid vignettes from daily life, verbal snapshots of scenes with which Jesus' audience would have immediately identified? They had all attended wedding feasts, for example, and they would have understood both the point about being unprepared when the groom came or about being improperly dressed for the celebration. Jesus' reference to these points may have also led them to think of real-life situations when they saw that very thing happen. Visual aids involve an audience in ways that few other rhetorical devices can. The moment an image is projected on a screen or a pic-

ture is set on an easel, every eye focuses on the visual object. The hearers are drawn to that object and they are affected by it, whether they want to be or not.

When we preach, we do not only want to address our audience on the intellectual or cognitive level. We also want to touch them on the affective or emotional level. And one of the most effective techniques for making an emotional impact is the use of stories, which we have already discussed. We won't repeat what we said above. At this point we might simply make a distinction between stories and illustrations. In our homiletical training we often heard about the importance of illustrations. We were rightly told that illustrations are the windows through which the light of understanding comes. The illustrations help our audience "see" points of doctrine or truths of Scripture they might not otherwise understand. They clarify and explain what wasn't clear before or what one didn't understand previously. But illustrations usually operate on the cognitive level, helping a person's intellectual perception of a truth. They do not usually have a strong emotional or affective impact. An example of the illuminating power of an illustration is Jesus' use of the picture of a seed. He told His disciples, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain" (Jn 12:24). The grain of wheat is an illustration of our Lord Himself. It was only by His "falling into the ground and dying"—through His suffering and death and subsequent resurrection—that Jesus could produce the harvest of salvation and life everlasting. What happens to seed after it is planted helps us understand the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection. While this illustration helps us understand an important truth, it does not necessarily touch us on the emotional level.

Saint Paul uses that illustration of a seed being planted to help us understand several important truths about our resurrection as well. In 1 Corinthians the apostle deals with a number of troubling questions people have about the resurrection, not the least of which is, "What kind of body will we have in the resurrection?" (cf. 1 Co 15:35) Paul uses the illustration of a seed that is planted to present two, closely-related truths. First, he uses that analogy to point out that a person has to die and be buried, even decay in the ground, before he can be raised to life (v. 36). In addition, that comparison between our body and seeds being "planted" shows that the body we'll have after being raised will be different from the body that was placed into the ground. The wheat that grows up is different from the seed that was planted. In the same way, the glorious bodies we'll have in the resurrection will be far different from the corruptible bodies that were laid in the grave. You hear this illustration and you say, "Now I see."

Simple illustrations or analogies help us grasp truths more fully. They bring the light of understanding into our once-darkened minds, so you can see how important it is that we include them in our sermons. Stories serve a different purpose, as we mentioned. While illustrations clarify, stories enlist; and where illustrations explain, stories create an experience. Or to put it another way, well-chosen stories draw the listener into the truth of the story and touch him at the affective level, not just the cognitive.

To see the power of stories, consider an historical account, such as God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac. What a range of emotions one feels when reading this story! There is, first of all, confusion over God's request, yes, even a touch of dismay over His "unreasonable" demand. There is also awe at Abraham's immediate, unquestioning response as he sets out with Isaac early the next morning. How our hearts ache when we hear Isaac ask about the lamb for the offering and listen to Abraham say, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." And who hasn't been cut deeply by seeing the sad, wondering eyes of Isaac as he lies bound on the altar and watches his father raise his hand to sacrifice him? What joy and relief we feel as we watch God stop Abraham from hurting his son and then provide the ram as his substitute! No matter how often you've heard the story, you can't help but be touched at the deepest level as you see what this tells us about two fathers, the father of the chosen people and the Father of all believers. We aren't only affected cognitively, growing in our understanding of God's sacrificial love. We are touched emotionally, feeling that love in our very souls.

There are other stories that have that same impact on us, both inside Scripture and outside. You may have told the story of Jeremy Forrester in one of your Easter sermons—the story of the twelve-year-old second grader of twisted body and limited mind. His teacher, Doris Miller, gave the class large, plastic eggs in which they were to bring something that shows new life. One student opened his egg to reveal a flower, another a butterfly and still another moss—all symbols of life. But when Jeremy's egg was opened, it was empty. The teacher tried to pass over that, not wanting to embarrass Jeremy, but Jeremy wouldn't let her. "What about my egg, Miss Miller?" he asked as the teacher set it aside. "But, Jeremy," she said kindly, "it's empty." "Yes," said Jeremy; "that's because Jesus' grave was empty when God raised Him to life." Three months later, when Jeremy passed away, those who came to his funeral saw nineteen plastic eggs from his classmates sitting on his casket—all empty.

Can you hear a story such as that and not be moved at the emotional level as well as the intellectual? I remember when I first told Jeremy's story in an Easter Sunday children's message years ago.



Everyone was silent for a long time after, and the only movement was people wiping away tears.

The story is a powerful way to move the truth of a text from the cognitive to the affective level. This is not to say that our sermons should be nothing but stories strung together, as one writer has suggested. Our preaching should be thoroughly textual and should focus on *His* story, not on *our* stories, no matter how interesting or moving our stories are. After every sermon we preach, our hearers should know a little better the story about a God who loves us so much He was willing to have His Son step into our place and endure in our stead all the shame and pain we deserved. In our sermons we want to “expound to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Jesus” (Luke 24:27). Biblical preaching is always evangelical in the true sense of that word, leading our hearers to see anew the depths of God’s saving love in Jesus. Every other story we tell must be subservient to *His* story.

As an aside, may I lament the move away from the story in our present catechism? Those who are familiar with the 1956 revision of the Gausewitz catechism know that the story played a large part in that catechism. The general format of the older catechism was similar to the current catechism, with questions and answers, followed by the Scripture passages on which the answers were based. But the earlier catechism often had “Scripture Reference(s)” beneath the answers as well. In fact, these references were given first, and then the Scripture passages were written out. These Scripture references were not merely longer passages—passages too long to include in full. More often than not, they were references to stories, e.g., to the three men in the fiery furnace under the explanation of what it means to “fear God above all things” and to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac under what it means to “love God above all things.” These stories were—and still are!—a powerful way to teach the truths of God’s Word.

### Conclusion

How are you to respond to the suggestions we have made in this paper? Sometimes a presentation such as this can elicit “the response of the three D’s.” It can make us defensive, it can suggest something we consider daunting, and its overall effect can be discouraging. To begin with, you may have the impression that we’re calling into question the way you were taught to preach at our seminary—and you may rightly feel somewhat defensive about that training. Secondly, it may seem that we’re asking you to revise radically the way you’ve been preparing your sermons for ten, twenty, or thirty or more years—and that seems like too daunting a task. As a result, you may go away more discouraged than uplifted, feeling that you won’t be able to

implement these suggestions, even if you're convinced there's merit in them. Next Sunday when you get up to preach it will be the "same old same old," except that then you'll be guilty about the way you preach.

Rest assured, first of all, that nothing in this presentation is designed to criticize the homiletics training done at our seminary.<sup>33</sup> It makes no difference whether you were trained to preach using Reu (as was my generation and the generation before me) or Gerlach and Balge (as were the last two generations). You received excellent training—and in a method that still communicates to today's audience. We can be thankful that we learned to preach under men who emphasized the priority of expounding the text and of holding up the crucified and risen Christ. And the deductive or propositional method our homiletics professors taught can be an effective way to frame one's presentation, even to a secondarily oral age. A clear, logical, progressive proclamation of God's Word is always going to be effective, no matter what the learning style of the people who hear it. The Holy Spirit will use that style of presenting His inspired Word to help your members grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The inductive and narrative approaches we have suggested can simply be additional ways for you to unfold the truths of Scripture. These can be ways that, from the human perspective, increase the impact of your sermons or that add variety to your preaching. In addition, you should not think that we are suggesting you completely overhaul your homiletical methodology. You probably are already doing some of the things we have suggested. You simply may not have noticed that you're doing them or you may not do them in a regular, on-going way. In your exposition of the text, for example, you may already be using the inductive approach, asking different questions and considering various possibilities as you unfold a passage to God's people. And I would venture to say that you have intuitively noted the difference between the impact an illustration has on your congregation and the effect a moving story has on them. I am simply encouraging you to be more conscious of such differences and then more intentional in bringing experiential and celebratory sections into your sermons. Rather than trying to incorporate every suggestion in your next sermon, you could implement one suggestion each week. Next Sunday focus on trying to be more imagistic; the week after, look for a story that will move the congregation affectively; and the third Sunday work on the multi-sensory aspect of your sermon. This incremental approach will give you more

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<sup>33</sup>Ed. note: At WLS, beginning preachers are trained in the deductive method, with Gerlach & Balge as textbook. For about ten years, training in alternate preaching methods—including those mentioned here—has been offered after the deductive method has been mastered. Careful text study, coherent paragraphs, clear logical progression, and writing for the ear are emphasized throughout.

time to think about and look for the pictures or stories or sensory elements you want to include.

I pray that you will take encouragement from what you've heard. Rest assured, there isn't the slightest suggestion in this presentation that "you've been doing it all wrong all these years." Just the opposite. As you faithfully open up the Scriptures and hold up the Savior Sunday after Sunday, God's people are blessed. All I am saying is that we can make a good thing even better—and that includes all of us, starting with me. We can really take our cue from the BASF commercial: "We don't make the things you use; we make the things you use *better!*" As pastors you can do what you do—"Preach the Word!"—and do it *better* or more effectively. The more thoroughly textual you become and the more audience-aware you are when you preach—which is really what we have been saying, just in different words—the more you will see the Holy Spirit use your sermons to touch hearts and transform lives. So keep on doing what you're doing. Just do it a little bit better with each succeeding week—for the glory of our gracious God and for the good of His dear people.