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## The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery, Eugene L. Lowry

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Book Reviews  
 Markus H. McDowell,  
 Eleanor Daniel,  
 Editors



Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 117 pages. Reviewed by David Fleer.

One advantage of living in the discipline of homiletics is the ample opportunity for testing theory. Pulpits, congregations, and biblical texts appear to be unending. Preaching theorists are privileged to try on theoretical construct. Often, one finds sample sermons included in the best of the literature. These are helpful models, although often groomed for the page and fine-tuned through several Sundays of preaching before different audiences. While the models shine, preachers will find themselves frustrated by the apparent perfection before their eyes. On several occasions I have had students respond to a Fred Craddock sermon with the honest concern, "How do I get from *here* (standing before this passage) to *there* (preaching a

Craddock-like jewel)!" Most helpful is the theorist who enables others to sample a different approach to preaching while warning against the pitfalls and dangers that accompany the art. For those open to sermonic forms that are sensitive to the genre of narrative, and for preachers who long for a bridge from text to sermon, Lowry's *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* presents itself as a map worth consulting.

Lowry's most notable contributions to narrative preaching have been *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, *The Homiletical Plot*, and *How to Preach a Parable*. His previous work has distinguished him as a leading theorist in homiletic thought. The earlier volumes have been mined for this textbook, which makes it not so much a secondary source as a practical and necessary sequel. Of all theorists in the discipline, Lowry is showing himself both inclusive of the contributions of others in the acad-

emy and quite sensitive to the practitioner.

Lowry is an advocate of the narrative sermon that always follows the plot form of *conflict*, *complication*, *reversal*, and *resolution*. In his latest book, Lowry redefines the last two terms (which become *sudden shift* and *unfolding*, respectively) to reflect his modified thought. He has fine-tuned his theory: *plot* takes precedence over the more general, and generally misunderstood, *narrative*.

Lowry's opening chapter provides a tight summary of the revolution in preaching, typically dated to Craddock's *As One Without Authority* (1971), and the current shape of the discussion. He follows Lucy Rose in naming four research categories and chooses the form of the sermon as the most helpful segment in defining the new homiletic. Three of the book's five chapters take up Rose's groupings: preaching's purpose, content, and form. The concluding

chapter is given to answering the bottom-line question: how to prepare for Sunday's sermon.

The final chapter's ten pragmatic suggestions for creating a "plotted sermon" is the section of the book preachers will look at with greatest longing. Ultimately, it will be the decisive chapter in judging the work's contribution to the development of the new homiletic.

According to Lowry, one begins the preparation process with an openness for the experience of the text, positioning oneself to be surprised and to hear the text afresh. Lowry's theological presupposition is that God's Spirit may be better able to break into the context of the preacher's expectant wonderment or even confusion than into the position of known certainties. Naming important issues and images and making connections from scripture to congregation all precede the preacher's engagement of scholarship. Lowry's creative restraint provides a helpful middle ground to popular extremes. He explains, "I hope we do not need to choose between dull, scholarly, instructive lecture-sermons and snappy, creative sound bites. So . . . let the imagination run loose for a while." Lowry closes out the preparation by naming the sermon's focus (not the answer the sermon will provide, but the difficulty the sermon will work through), shaping the sermon, and identifying what the sermon hopes to evoke.

Lowry's pragmatic suggestions are generally helpful but not satisfying. There is not enough praxis presented to make the advice personally useful. For example, when discussing "planning the sermon process" (the ninth of ten steps and the one that finalizes the sermon's form), Lowry is absorbed with two

questions: where to place the text, and a one-sided debate pitting the pointed sermon against the forward-moving plotted model. The latter issue has been adequately addressed in earlier volumes, and the former question is an odd location for the only matter discussed under the sermon's shape. While Lowry on occasion rehearses arguments and concerns he has treated elsewhere, at other times he assumes reader familiarity with his proposals and makes only passing allusions in his current work.

Lowry's ten steps are the articulation of years of wrestling with creative sermon development. Yet the preacher is left unfulfilled by his examples and demonstrations. If Lowry provided fuller sermons and worked forward or backward through the process, perhaps readers would have a better sense of his format for developing a narrative sermon. It is a strategy Lowry worked to perfection in *How to Preach a Parable*. Instead, the current volume uses segments of Lowry's exegetical insights and clips from a variety of sermon preps and makes the author appear more like a professor who has honed his theory than a master who wishes to pass his craft on to willing apprentices. The problem is that the author, this book, and the discipline are all sought in the latter role.

Lowry is an experienced preacher and a thoughtful teacher. But, in a book that claims to make the question of praxis central, he has fallen short of satisfying the hunger of the preacher who looks for a definitive meal in narrative preaching. Lowry has only whetted the appetite.

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Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Reviewed by Mark Frost.

How should preaching address culture? Should the preacher begin with words, images, and metaphors clearly understood by the culture, using them to explain and defend the gospel? Or must he use biblical words and constructs foreign to his hearers, expecting Word to challenge and transform cultural norms? How a preacher answers these questions affects how much attention he gives to the study of the text and how much he gives to the process of communication.

Over the past quarter century, the homiletics community has increasingly answered these questions with one voice. The movement known as "narrative preaching" has taught preachers to start with concepts and images with which their hearers can easily identify. Then, paying careful attention to the communication process, the preachers tell stories in which the hearers can see themselves and identify with the gospel. Leaders of the narrative preaching movement, such as Charles Rice, Fred Craddock, Thomas Long, and Eugene Lowry, have become widely viewed as nearly unassailable authorities.

Charles Campbell, a homiletics professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, challenges this conventional wisdom in *Preaching Jesus*. While the book is a critique of the narrative preaching movement, it is more fundamentally a challenge to the liberal theology that he claims lies behind it.

Campbell names as his ally in the assault Yale theologian Hans Frei. Frei's critique of liberal theology

focused on three major areas. First, Frei challenged liberal theology's apologetic aim, which seeks to "translate" the ancient worldview of the biblical writers into categories understandable to moderns. Frei pointed out that the Bible's human authors seldom engaged in such apologetics, choosing rather to proclaim a new reality that they knew would be a "stumbling block" to some and "foolishness" to others. Second, Frei challenged the liberal tendency to value biblical teaching only when it can be correlated to the modern scientific mindset, suggesting rather that faith must value all revelation, even as it struggles to understand difficult teachings. Finally, Frei charged that liberal theologians first diagnose the human condition, then rummage through the medicine cabinet of scripture looking for salves and ointments to ameliorate the symptoms. Instead, Frei argued, it is only in scripture's proclamation of Jesus that one comes to understand both the human condition and the only possible cure.

Campbell suggests that much of modern preaching, in form if not in content, has been shaped by the false assumptions of liberal theology. In fact, Campbell attributes the triumph of style over substance in modern preaching to the fruits of liberalism. He takes the narrative preaching movement to task on four fronts. First, he suggests that Craddock et al. incorrectly identify the purpose of preaching. For them, preaching is designed to create a unique experiential event in individual hearers. Campbell rightly points out that the aim of biblical preaching was not so much to touch individuals as it was to form a particular kind of community—one that would take its shape from the person of Jesus. Second, Campbell suggests that faithful

preaching proclaims the identity of Jesus rather than trying to apply selected gospel truths to supposed human psychological frailties. Third, narrative preachers use the gospel accounts to shape the form of their sermons, trying to mold their message into stories like the ones Jesus told, especially the parables. Campbell suggests that the gospel narratives were meant to have much greater impact on the *content* of sermons than on the form. Finally, Campbell calls for the emphasis in preaching to shift from studying Jesus as the master communicator to the proclamation of Jesus as the message to be communicated.

Campbell's courageous challenge to the assumptions behind narrative preaching is a vital message for all preachers who take seriously the divine origin of scripture. Many preachers have profited from the insights of the narrative movement. But Campbell reminds them that the power in preaching ultimately finds its ground, not in methodology or form or process, but in the unique person of Jesus, Son of God. Only preaching that faithfully proclaims him can lay claim to being biblical preaching.

There are some weaknesses in Campbell's arguments. He sees preaching as an event that takes place only within a Christian community, among fellow Christians. Campbell does not include in his scope evangelistic preaching, in which it would be more appropriate to state the gospel in culturally understandable terms. Another weakness is his almost total preoccupation with the Gospels, as if they were the totality of biblical truth. While the life of Jesus is central to Christian faith, there is much variety in biblical revelation that provides the preacher wider latitude in how

he presents the message. Finally, while Campbell strongly contends for the preaching of Jesus in his uniqueness, Campbell's own application of Jesus' message boils down to an insipid call for nonviolence, à la Martin Luther King and Gandhi.

Even with its weaknesses, this is a valuable book and may well come to stand as a significant turning point in the study of homiletics. That shift, from the worship of form to the proclamation of Jesus as Christ, is one that all Bible-believing preachers will enthusiastically support.

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Alyce M. McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 170 pages. \$15.00. Reviewed by Russ Holden.

Alyce McKenzie writes to call forth proverbs "from the tomb into a pulpit resurrection." Her work divides into three sections. Part 1 describes the literary characteristics of a proverb and discusses its cultural function. Proverbs are viewed as creating order (used to maintain the status quo in society) or subverting order (used by those on the margins of social power to promote a different worldview). Beginning with the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser, McKenzie suggests looking through the text's repertoire in order to move from proverb to sermon. The reader will note the historical-social, theological, and literary norms of the proverb. Attention is given to the perspective of the proverb: Who is the narrator? What is the topic and comment? Is the proverb creating order or subverting it?

Part 2 explores proverbs that create and subvert order by examining Qohelet in Ecclesiastes, proverbs of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and contemporary proverbs. The section on contemporary proverbs is a healthy reminder that proverbial material is all around us. Contemporary proverbs may challenge our biblical worldview.

Part 3 provides sample sermons and six models for preaching proverbs. "The Roving Spotlight" takes a proverb and places it in a number of contemporary situations, "spotlighting" how that proverb provides wisdom for those circumstances. "The Sometimes, but Not Always" accents the fact that a proverb is a partial generalization. The sermon attempts to view the situations where the proverb would fit and the cases where it would not fit. "The Double Take" is a similar approach for proverbs that sound too good to be true. It also attempts to find the situations where the generalization would apply and those where it would not. These first three models are used for proverbs that create order.

"Dueling Proverbs" is a model that can be used for a "subversive" proverb. It can be helpful in contrasting a biblical proverb with a contemporary proverb. "The Challenger" is used for proverbs that question the assumptions of either culture or church. "The Advocate" speaks to the congregation in the face of an opposing dominant culture. A well-known cultural proverb may be paired with a biblical proverb to give the community a theological context for their striving. These last models apply to proverbs that subvert order.

The paradigm of order and subversion for viewing proverbs tends to color the findings. The point seems to be that proverbs readily convey accepted truths. Yet they also have the power to bring hearers to consider truths not yet accepted, because they report experience and require reflection. Although McKenzie views Qohelet as an intra-wisdom critique and not a desire to rebel against his tradition, the order/subversion grid leads to overstatements. She writes, "The theological reflections that underlie Qohelet's use of proverbial sayings manage to

subvert all three of normative wisdom's assumptions." Yet rather than subverting (that is, destroying) the assumptions (for example, that wisdom leads to riches), Qohelet helps us understand the wise application of this general truth. Proverbs itself has some "better than" proverbs that do the same thing (Prov 15:16-17; 16:8, 16).

Readers may take issue with the reader-response criticism of Iser as a beginning point for hermeneutics. McKenzie also spends a great deal of time with Q in the discussion of the Synoptic Gospels, which some preachers may find less helpful. The assertion that John's choice of the masculine *Logos* instead of the feminine *Sophia* "foreshadowed the later neglect of Wisdom in the West" is at best controversial.

Despite these reservations, McKenzie's sample sermons are moving and eloquent. Having committed the "sin" of preaching some boring sermons from Proverbs, I found her models worthy of consideration. Her insights can help breathe life into proverbs for the pulpit.

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