

Consensus

Volume 17
Issue 1 *Adult Education*

Article 20

5-1-1991

How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons

Donald C. Nevile

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Nevile, Donald C. (1991) "How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons," *Consensus*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol17/iss1/20>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

in fact; it is about aspects of a specific style of ministry, using some ACoA concerns as occasional examples.

The final section consists of three chapters about the dynamics of how the church as a system may itself display addictive disorder. This could have been a fascinating study, even if brief, but this entire section feels rushed and disorganized, and offers little insight.

I had hoped from the title and the Table of Contents that this book would be the single volume which would cover most of the issues, and systematize most of the research in the field of pastoral care and the ACoA. The authors have certainly tried to minister to the whole person, using all that the church has to offer. It is confident and optimistic, and certainly pastorally written, and does contain some insight. However, it contains nothing original, and is needlessly jargony. So much background in the field is needed to recognize or understand the many glancing references to other works and ideas, that if one has the necessary background, one doesn't need this book. The bibliography contains the usual list of standard works, but some authors of important or closely related books are missing. For example, John Bradshaw's *Healing the Shame that Binds You* (Florida: 1988) addresses and supports directly most of what Callahan and McDonnell say, but he is omitted, as is Sean Sammon's *Alcoholism's Children: ACoA's in Priesthood and Religious Life* (New York: 1989).

The authors of *Adult Children of Alcoholics: Ministers and the Ministries* have tried valiantly to integrate ACoA issues with many strands of contemporary theological and pastoral thought, and they are obviously deeply committed to caring for people wounded by alcoholism. But this volume is really an advocacy of a specific spirituality and style of ministry rather than a handbook on understanding and helping ACoA's, and there are better introductions to both pastoral care and ACoA issues available.

Eric Richard Griffin
Grace Anglican Church, Arthur, Ontario

How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons

Eugene L. Lowry
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989
173 pp. \$17.50

With this volume in the Abingdon Preachers' Library, Eugene Lowry, the dean of narrative preachers, adds to his already extensive publications on narrative preaching (*The Homiletical Plot*, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*). Lowry, who teaches preaching at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, is concerned here to make narrative preaching accessible to those who

may be apprehensive about this style. To do so, he presents four narrative sermons and investigates them to determine what narrative preachers do and how they do it.

By way of introduction, Lowry provides background material on recent biblical scholarship on story and parable. He presents a rather McLuhanesque picture of the medium of the story as its message, a telescoping of form and content. He suggests that "... a parable doesn't *have* a point, it *is* a point. Further, there is no external referent at all; the message is held in solution" (20). Powerful stories do not so much *say* something as *do* something to us. Meaning does not stand outside a story or narrative, but is part of its substance. Consequently, Lowry will not use stories as "illustrations" in preaching, to entertain the listener or emphasize a point: the point is the story.

In Lowry's preaching, narrative does not mean a sermon full of stories, nor a sermon as one long story, but that "... all sermons ought to follow a narrative sequence of opening conflict, escalation, reversal, and proleptic closure" (25). This is Lowry's narrative form. He applies this to the biblical text through the analogy of an automobile trip: just as the trip is made up of the car plus the context of highway, movement, and destination, so the sermon is a journey which is shaped by its vehicle, the biblical text.

Lowry suggests that there are four approaches to the text and sermon, each involving a somewhat different shape given to the sermonic journey. These approaches are Running the Story, Delaying the Story, Suspending the Story, and Alternating the Story. It is the text, along with the questions asked of it, which will dictate the shape of the sermonic journey.

Herein lies one of Lowry's most valuable contributions to homiletic theory: instead of trying to isolate a discursive theme which answers questions and achieves closure, Lowry prefers to "stay out of the driver's seat," asking questions of the text, looking for trouble, and searching for the *focus*, *turn*, and *aim* of text and sermon. The preacher's response to those questions will determine which narrative model the preacher chooses.

Lowry's four models are illustrated, with running commentary, in four chapters, each of which includes a sermon representative of the model. The preachers he chooses are Dennis M. Willis, Fred Craddock, Leander Keck, and himself. These four models he sees as "basic yet reasonably flexible shapes that narrative sermons may likely take" (173).

The book is a well-written and elegant presentation of Lowry's theory of narrative preaching, which builds on and expands his basic theory as presented in *The Homiletical Plot*. For those who have hesitated to experiment with narrative preaching, or who are uncertain of its biblical integrity, this book will reassure them, and provide both theoretical and practical assistance.

A mixed blessing of the book, and others like it on preaching, is that the sermons included are top-notch—hardly an encouragement to the average preacher who struggles weekly with limited imagination and scholarly resources! This reviewer especially found the sermon by Dennis Willis an

astonishing tour-de-force: "Noah was a Good Man" (Genesis 7-8-9). Buy the book for this sermon alone!

Donald Nevile
Peace Lutheran Church, Pickering, Ontario

A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method

Richard L. Eslinger

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987

191 pp. \$14.80

Richard Eslinger, who teaches homiletics at Duke University Divinity School, places himself clearly in the camp of those who believe "... that the old topical/conceptual approach to preaching is critically, if not terminally, ill" (11). The "propositions and illustrations" style of preaching is over the hill, he says, being routinely met with "blank stares and congregational inattention" (11). Its ideas and illustrations, he claims, rarely connect, and little of its form or substance finds its way into the consciousness, faith, or life of its listeners.

There is no lack of alternate theories for the concerned preacher today. The problem is to make sense of the plethora of contemporary styles. Eslinger, rather than providing an exhaustive survey of the whole homiletic terrain, observes that there are three newer basic styles of preaching emerging from the old orthodoxy: an inductive approach, a narrative or story form, and a method based on the movement and structure of the biblical text.

In this book, Eslinger looks at the methods of five major contemporary homileticians who represent these three trends: Charles Rice (story-telling), Henry Mitchell (black narrative preaching), Fred Craddock (inductive preaching), Eugene Lowry (narrative and inductive forms), and David Buttrick (structure and form within the text). After giving an explication of the method of each of these and an evaluation of their method, Eslinger includes a sermon by each person, representing his style.

The idea behind this book is a good one. To acquire, read, and absorb the homiletical texts written by these five scholars, much less to put the theory into homiletical practise, would be a formidable task. Eslinger provides us with enough explanation and detail to understand what each individual is trying to communicate homiletically, and to try it out for ourselves. At any rate, this reviewer found it possible to create flexible homiletic worksheets that reflect the theories of Rice, Craddock, and Lowry from Eslinger's descriptions: these have served as practical entries into the homiletic styles of these three teachers.