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# DEDUCTIVE, INDUCTIVE ... AND A THIRD WAY

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## DEDUCTIVE, INDUCTIVE . . . AND A THIRD WAY

“From Print-Age Preaching to Digital Age Preaching”

By R. J. Gore Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This paper is my third attempt to consider the topic, “From Print-Age Preaching to Digital-Age Preaching.” The first paper, “Failure to Communicate,” looked at the problem of preaching in the contemporary world, considered briefly the roots of modern expository preaching, and concluded with a discussion of the need “to make a fresh effort to look at the relationship between the twin horizons of the unchanging Word (and the Biblical world from which it sprang), and today’s World.”<sup>2</sup> The second paper, “Necessities and Capacities,” examined the historical stages of communication (from the age of primary orality to the literate or print age, and from the print age to the digital age), considered generational changes and their impact on communication, and concluded that the unparalleled changes experienced in the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have made preaching a “formidable” task, requiring the preacher to “find new paths to old, familiar destinations.”<sup>3</sup> The stated goal of this series was to “discover some new insights and tools that will enable [preachers] to preach ‘wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers’ in ways that are both faithful to the Word and effective in our World.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> R. J. Gore Jr., “Failure to Communicate,” *Journal of Modern Ministry*, 8:1 (Winter, 2011): 158.

<sup>3</sup> R. J. Gore Jr., “Necessities and Capacities,” *Journal of Modern Ministry*, 8:2 (Spring, 2011): 133.

<sup>4</sup> Gore, “Failure to Communicate,” 159-160. The phrase, “necessities and capacities of the hearers,” is from the answer to Larger Catechism, Q. 159, “How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?”

In light of the previous articles, what is the twenty-first century preacher to do? The evidence is clear on at least one point: print-age preaching is not well-suited for the digital age. This does not mean there are no effective “print-age preachers” in pulpits today, nor does it mean there are no “print-age listeners” in congregations. Rather, the point is that the shifts in culture, communication, and technology explored earlier leave us with the unavoidable conclusion that the “the necessities and capacities of the hearers” have changed, particularly from the mid twentieth-century until the present. In light of the profound changes we have considered, it is even more imperative now that preachers revisit the twin horizons of Word and World.

As an Evangelical, I believe what the Bible teaches does not change, but the listening audience does change and has changed profoundly in the last half-century. Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York city, building on the critical work of Charles Taylor’s *The Secular Age*, enumerates five narratives (“about human rationality, history, society, morality, and identity”) that he describes as “the basic cultural narratives or ‘unthoughts’ of the late modern mind.”<sup>5</sup> He further states, “The key to preaching to a culture . . . is to identify its baseline cultural narratives.”<sup>6</sup> Awareness of the preaching context is critical to effective preaching. Johannes Vos, in his commentary on the Larger Catechism, makes these comments:

**6. Why must ministers take the “necessities and capacities of the hearers” into consideration in their preaching?** Because if they fail to do this, their preaching will be largely ineffective and useless. The truth of God is always the same, but it must be preached in a somewhat different manner to different groups of people. The manner or method of preaching that would be suited to an audience of non-Christians on a foreign mission field would be different from that suited to a congregation of Christian believers in the same country, and the latter would be somewhat different from that suited to a congregation of Christian believers in America. The minister may not deviate from the truth of God, but he must try to present the truth of God in such a way that his hearers, whoever they may be, will really “get the point.”<sup>7</sup>

Vos wrote the original articles (that became part of his commentary on the Westminster Larger Catechism) between 1946 and 1949, a time when one could hardly anticipate today’s religious diversity or imagine the technological challenges of our digital age. Indeed, were he to write this today, he might very well speak of the mission field as next door to the church—not in a foreign land.

A quarter-century later, Klaas Runia’s Tyndale Biblical Theology lecture (delivered 1976, published 1978) addressed the twin concerns of Word and World with near prophetic insight:

Preaching therefore is indispensable, today just as much as in the first century. Does this mean that we can ignore all the *criticisms* of present-day preaching which we mentioned at the beginning of this lecture? Are such criticisms actually evidence of unbelief? In my

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Johannes Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 454.

opinion, it would be a serious mistake to draw such a conclusion. When we say that preaching is still as indispensable today as it was in the first century, this does not at all imply that our form of preaching is also indispensable. We should never lose sight of the fact that the sermons as we hear them on Sunday in the church services represent a *certain cultural form of preaching*. Throughout the centuries there have been different forms. The way Augustine preached was quite different from that of the Apostolic Fathers, and our preaching is quite again different from the Middle Ages or in the century after the Reformation. It may well be that we in our time, which is characterized by new forms of communication, in particular those of the mass media, have to search for other forms. At the same time we have to be realistic. Up to the present such new forms have not come forward. . . As long as new forms are not available, we should certainly not do away with the old form.<sup>8</sup>

Are there new forms, new wineskins, available now . . . or are we still waiting for an epiphany?

### Structures

The title of this article indicates that there are three major foci under consideration: deductive sermons, inductive sermons, and some not yet undefined “third way.” Definition of terms is always useful for providing clarity, and so we will begin by asking this question: What do we mean by deductive and inductive preaching? As we shall see, deductive preaching, though perhaps a term not familiar to all, is a form of preaching that most churchgoers would know very well, and so the section on deductive preaching will be appropriately brief. Inductive preaching, however, may be less familiar. The discussion of inductive preaching will consider the contributions of two important homileticians who offer similar and complementary versions of inductive preaching, Fred Craddock (Christian Church, Disciples) and Gene Lowry (United Methodist). The “third way” will consider the more recent work of the late Calvin Miller (Baptist) and Paul Wilson (Lutheran) as possible alternatives to deductive and inductive preaching.

While some homileticians might quibble with the following, I nonetheless propose these as working definitions. Deductive sermons are those which begin with a thesis or proposition and then proceed to elaborate that thesis by a series of supporting propositions. This is a form or structure that is often used by expository preachers. Inductive sermons are those which reserve the thesis until later in the sermon where the thesis often functions as the **result** of homiletic exploration conducted jointly by the preacher and the congregation. Preachers who prefer narrative sermons often employ an inductive structure. Technically, it would be wrong simply to identify expository sermons as deductive, or narrative sermons as inductive, but given their normal structures and tendencies, in general, they are often used interchangeably.

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<sup>8</sup> Klaas Runia, “What is Preaching According to the New Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 29 (1978): 47.

### *Traditional Expository Sermon: Deductive*

There was a time when it was customary to think of sermons almost exclusively in terms of “the particular doctrine,” the “central doctrine or proposition,” or “the progression, and the advance, and the development of the argument and the case.”<sup>9</sup> For many Evangelicals, this is simply the expository sermon that we have heard—and perhaps preached—for much of our lives. And there are indeed circumstances when preaching a traditional, logic-oriented, expository sermon is appropriate. One might argue, for example, that significant portions of Pauline literature are so structured that the logical, deductive structure of the expository sermon is well-suited to the text.

Haddon Robinson discusses sermon forms and notes that “deductive” sermons are propositional, with the preacher convincing his hearers as though he is a debater.<sup>10</sup> Everything that the preacher is going to say flows out of the proposition or thesis statement. This is a structure that I am very familiar with, and used to be comfortable with. I would suspect that many church folks my age or older would be accustomed to sermons structured this way. But many younger parishioners in their 40s or below have been so influenced by our postmodern, image-based culture that such sermons are not second-nature to them. They are visitors to the print-age. In some congregations this generational span could present a significant challenge to responsible preachers trying to address digital-age listeners effectively while maintaining a preaching ministry that connects with those accustomed to print-age preaching.<sup>11</sup> As congregations mature and parishioners age, the number of Builder and Baby Boomer parishioners continues to decrease. In fact, it is almost a demographic certainty that any congregation that is growing today is increasingly populated by digital-age parishioners. How will this affect the structure of the sermon?

There are other issues with deductive sermons. All too often, print-age preaching approaches a pericope of Scripture with a preconceived structure, demanding that the text give way to the favored—and familiar—three-point structure. There are times when a classic, three-point sermon is appropriate; but surely this structure should not be privileged at all times and for all texts. Sadly, some preachers use the classic three-point sermon as they would a Ronco Vegematic, slicing and dicing equally every text it touches. Or, to use another image, some use the three-point sermon like a Jell-O mold that makes all your gelatin desserts, regardless of flavor or extra ingredients, look exactly the same. It is always easier to go with the familiar, and the classic, three-point sermon is simply the default setting for many preachers.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 76-7.

<sup>10</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 121.

<sup>11</sup> Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 12, notes that “a post-everything world is saturated with multiple contexts and cultural assumptions.” However, Dennis M. Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 69, cautions against exaggerating the differences. “Similarities are greater than dissimilarities. People are still people.”

It is a commonplace among homileticians of all stripes, especially proponents of expository preaching, that a sermon should be based on a text of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there is widespread agreement that proper exegesis of the selected text is essential to sermon preparation. By definition, deductive sermons (i.e., expository preaching), involve teaching the Bible. Such sermons seek to expound the meaning of Scripture as heard by its original audience, and explain its meaning for the audience listening today. Furthermore, among the best practitioners, there is agreement that the exposition of Scripture involves application. As John Frame reminds us in his Trinitarian model, application is not extraneous to meaning; meaning is application.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, every sermon ought to involve teaching the Word of God and relating that teaching to the lives and concerns of the listeners.<sup>14</sup>

Now, some preachers of expository sermons seem convinced that a sermon ought to involve an explanation of everything in the text, or at least a preponderance of the data in the text. However, much of Jesus' teaching and preaching involved "Big Ideas" or "Big Picture" lessons.<sup>15</sup> In fact, often the details—as in some of the parables—were incidental.<sup>16</sup> Too many sermons lose their listeners in the morass of details, many of which are neither directly related to the biblical theme nor absolutely necessary for the clarity of the sermon.<sup>17</sup> The late Fred Craddock (d. 2015) warned: "To say one thing each Sunday for fifty weeks is good medicine; to say fifty things each Sunday is to distribute aspirin in the waiting room."<sup>18</sup> Preachers must learn

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<sup>12</sup> There are exceptions. For example, Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation Through Conversation" in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 5, says the "preparation and movement of the sermon could (and sometimes should) originate from other points [i.e., other than Scripture] and involve other voices."

<sup>13</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> According to Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights From the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 58, "preaching that teaches the Bible in its original context is a major factor in reaching the unchurched . . . mentioned by 211 of all our 353 survey respondents." Moreover, "the topic of life application preaching was mentioned by 147 of the 353 respondents" and many of the formerly unchurched "saw no dichotomy between deep expositional preaching and life application preaching," 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, Haddon Robinson comes to mind.

<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 51, "We should find allegory in the parables of Jesus only when we must, not simply when we can."

<sup>17</sup> Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 158, notes that one of the problems of our information age is that we continually overload our prefrontal cortices with so much information they cannot process all the data. His conclusion? Less is more, 159-60.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 83.

to resist the temptation to tell everything they know about a passage in what Derek Thomas describes as the “‘I have a seminary education and I am determined to let you know that’ sermon.”<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, details are important, but focusing on the big idea is much more important, especially if you want the sermon to be remembered a day or two later. That means sermon divisions should be limited and must have natural movement. Traditionally, the deductive sermon moved through the text in a logical or outlined fashion. However, there are other ways to frame movement in a sermon. For example, a preacher might choose to follow the emotional, structural, or narrative flow. Whatever the method of moving through the text, movement should be fluid and natural and support the big idea. If transitions sound like the outline of an academic lecture, the preacher may well lose digital-age listeners. A number of volumes, including David Buttrick’s *Homiletic*, suggest ways of moving through a sermon that avoid the choppiness of the classroom.<sup>20</sup>

We live in the age of the sound bite; our listeners have little capacity for substantive arguments, and that includes sermons. How times have changed! In an earlier paper I made passing reference to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858.<sup>21</sup> These debates attracted great throngs of listeners. For example, on August 21, 1858, approximately 12,000 people gathered in Ottawa, Illinois to hear the debates. Those who gathered heard Mr. Douglas speak for an hour. Mr. Lincoln then took an hour and a half to respond. Mr. Douglas then responded for an additional half-hour. Following a supper break, a smaller crowd of 1500 gathered to hear another politician speak for an hour and a quarter. Indeed, this was a golden age for public discourse<sup>22</sup> and the prevailing discourse was literary, shaped by and suited to the rhythm, cadence, and structure of print-age communication.<sup>23</sup> Print-age public speech modeled print-age writing: propositional, logical, and precise.

### *Impact of the Digital Age*

However, the world has changed markedly since the nineteenth century. And in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, cultural change has

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<sup>19</sup> Derek Thomas, “Expository Preaching,” in *Feed My Sheep*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 82-3. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 54, warns that “the subject that can be exhaustively handled in a sermon should never be the subject of a sermon. And yet how many sermons one hears in which the impression is given that the preacher had walked all the way around God and had taken pictures.”

<sup>20</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), chapters 2-5.

<sup>21</sup> Gore, “Necessities and Capacities,” 120-121.

<sup>22</sup> This event is described in great detail by Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 113-130 and is summarized in Leonard Sweet, “Outstorming Christianity’s Perfect Storm,” in *The Church of the Perfect Storm*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas*, xv.

accelerated at an amazing pace. Radio programs contributed to the shrinkage of the American attention span as listeners became accustomed to short programs or longer variety programs with many short acts. The onset of commercial television in the late 1940s and its “Golden Age” in the 1950s further reduced the ever-shrinking attention span of the American audience and gave birth to the image-based culture that now dominates the twenty-first century. As William Dyrness explains, “The generation reaching adulthood today represents the second generation of those raised on TV and videos. They have by all accounts a high sense of visual literacy.”<sup>24</sup> And, one might add, the attention span of a gnat! Susan Jacoby notes that the average sound bite of presidential candidates on televised news “dropped from 42.3 seconds to 9.8 seconds” from 1968 to 1988 and in the year 2000, “was down to just 7.8 seconds.”<sup>25</sup>

The task of the twenty-first century preacher is formidable. Not only does the preacher have to confront listeners who are citizens of the digital age, he also must reckon with those analog “visitors” who remain, predominantly, print-age thinkers and communicators. In other words, today’s preacher frequently does not have the luxury of tailoring his preaching to an exclusively print-age or digital-age audience. That would make the task far too easy! Instead of preaching to a congregation of likeminded souls, today’s preacher holds court in the midst of what David Buttrick has described as a “cultural breakdown,” citing “the collapse of the Greco-Roman world, the dissolution of the medieval synthesis, and the mid-twentieth century” as examples.<sup>26</sup> To quote from the second article in this series, “In the postmodern world, adrift from the printed page—though not fully cut off from it; and surrounded by the full digital massage—though not entirely adjusted to it, the preacher must find new paths to old, familiar destinations.”

### Narrative Versus Exposition

As we consider further the issue of sermon type/structure, we note that the preacher’s desire to “teach” in a sermon does not mean that he is obligated always to employ a deductive, propositional style sermon.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, there may be some valuable insights from the proponents of

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<sup>24</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 129.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 257.

<sup>26</sup> David Buttrick, “On Doing Homiletics Today,” in *Intersections*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 93.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Ralph L. Lewis with Gregg Lewis, *Learning to Preach Like Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 12-13, argues against a deductive, propositional structure, saying, “. . . the most significant lesson I’ve learned about preaching has only come in the last few years. After decades of teaching preaching. After years of studying homiletics. After long hours analyzing great preachers and their sermons for common preaching principles. After preaching hundreds and hundreds of my own sermons. After grading thousands of student sermons. . . . As I began to compare what I had learned over the years with what the Bible showed me about Jesus’ preaching, everything seemed so obvious I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it before. . . . Why don’t we preach like Jesus?”



the New Homiletic<sup>28</sup> about sermon structure, plot suspense, and inductive funneling—insights that are invaluable for those who seek to preach digital-age sermons.<sup>29</sup> The “New Homiletic” was a movement beginning in the 1970s that produced a number of novel approaches to preaching with the common feature of “some kind of procedural *plotting* as sermonic *means*, generally involving a strategic delay in the arrival of the preacher’s meaning.”<sup>30</sup> In spite of their criticism of the traditional, deductive sermon, the key figures in the New Homiletic movement did not seek to replace the older preaching paradigm with some new, universally-employed sermon structure. For example, after warning that the method he proposes is not “*the method*,” Craddock wisely noted that the “forms of preaching should be as varied as the forms of rhetoric in the New Testament, or as the purposes of preaching or as the situations of those who listen.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, uniformity in method and product is just not possible. Even if preachers selected the same text and used the same sermon type/structure (whether narrative or expository), Craddock writes: “we shall all do it differently, since, in Phillips Brooke’s famous definition, preaching is ‘truth through personality.’”<sup>32</sup>

Craddock’s 1971 work, *As One Without Authority*, is now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition.<sup>33</sup> Craddock was a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples) and the Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus at Candler School of Theology. In Part One, chapter one, “The Pulpit in the Shadows,” Craddock notes that there is need to be concerned about preaching since critics have given the pulpit “poor reviews” since the first century (3). He wryly suggests that the reason for such criticism “may be simply that these critics have heard us preach” (3).

Craddock complains that most seminaries educate students of preaching by using principles of Greek rhetoric (5). Further complicating today’s task of preaching (remember that he was writing in 1971!) is the impact of modern culture that has moved from “oral to literal and now perhaps to aural receptivity” (10). Most disturbing of all is the fact that as the culture around us has shifted, sermons have “with few exceptions, kept the same form” (13). As Craddock pointedly observes, “either preachers have access to a world that is neat, orderly, and unified,

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<sup>28</sup> Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, exp. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 122-3.

<sup>29</sup> See the helpful discussions on the “essential elements of a story,” 22-34 and the “seven basic plot plans,” 35-44, in Austin B. Tucker, *The Preacher as Storyteller* (Nashville: B&H, 2008). An older treatment of similar issues is Bruce C. Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Lowry, 122-3.

<sup>31</sup> Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> David Jackman, “The Hermeneutical Distinctives of Expository Preaching,” in *Preach the Word*, eds., Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Long says Craddock was “one of the most influential preachers and homileticians of our time.” Thomas G. Long, “What Happened to Narrative Preaching?” *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost, 2005): 10.

which gives their sermons their form, or they are out of date and out of touch with the way it is. In either case, they do not communicate” (13).

In chapter two, “The Pulpit in the Spotlight,” Craddock argues that the shift from a print culture to an “oral-aural world” undermines the effectiveness of the traditional, logical form of preaching (26). Moreover, the preacher does not live and preach in some ideal world but instead must communicate in view of the “concrete, lived experiences of individuals and societies” (29). Craddock’s suggested response in Part Two is to make a Copernican shift in the way sermons are constructed, from deductive to inductive (48). This shift is not set in concrete, as though every sermon must follow his suggested method. Rather, Craddock writes that the sermon structure should be determined by the text, the intended goal, and the listening audience (45).

Craddock does maintain, however, that the changes in culture and the shift in ways of communicating undermine the formerly “authoritative foundation of traditional preaching” (46). Why should the preacher consider inductive preaching?<sup>34</sup> “If the time comes, and it has, when people are either uninterested in those major premises of universal and general truth (i.e., ‘all people are unrighteous’) or they question the authority of their source (i.e., church or scripture), those whose mission it is to convince others must go into the marketplace prepared to reason inductively” (60). Instead of delivering unassailable truths and expecting listeners simply to embrace those truths, the preacher needs to lead those listeners to reach their own conclusions so that “the implication for their own situations is not only clear but personally inescapable” (49). As Craddock says later in the book, “the sole purpose is to engage the hearer in the pursuit of an issue or an idea so that he will think his own thoughts and experience his own feelings in the presence of Christ and in the light of the gospel” (124).

Inductive preaching may appear to be less serious than traditional, deductive preaching (73), but it is not an excuse for laziness and may indeed require more work (79). And, inductive preaching is not a justification for wandering all over the rhetorical playing field. Rather, “no preacher has the right to look for points until he has the point” (85). Furthermore, Craddock does not believe “‘points,’ announced or otherwise made obvious” are helpful (115). Indeed, the journey from initial concern to “Aha!” moment would be jeopardized by the prominence of the traditional outline with points and sub-points. Instead of a controlling outline, “which has enjoyed too much prominence in the history of preaching” (121), “the structure must be subordinate to movement” (115). Movement, which may involve drama, story, conversation (117), poem, essay, or parable (119) has two functions: it “sustains interest and preserves the anticipation necessary . . . to hold attention,” and it is “integral to content,” or the flow of words. In the inductive sermon, movement accomplishes what the outline does for the deductive sermon, but without the outline’s abruptness or prominence. The Bible itself contains many oral and written forms, with their own internal movement, which may inform our efforts to frame the sermon (121).

For Craddock, one who is interested in teaching should not assume that the only way to teach effectively is by using an outline with a thesis, main points, and sub-points.<sup>35</sup> Much of what Jesus accomplished as a teacher was directly related to his ability to meet people where

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<sup>34</sup> Long, “What Happened to Narrative Preaching,” 10, notes that Craddock’s concern is “sermon *structure and logic*” and that it was “Craddock’s *practice* more than his theory that put him in the forefront of . . . narrative preaching.”

<sup>35</sup> Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 26.

they were and initiate conversations on terms they would embrace.<sup>36</sup> He was the kind of person who attracted the interest of others. He made frequent and effective use of figures of speech and pictorial language.<sup>37</sup> His stories often provided the most unusual plot resolutions which left people astounded.<sup>38</sup> The most important thing one can say about Jesus as communicator is that he “got through” to his listeners. And he was anything but boring!

Eugene Lowry, United Methodist minister and former professor of preaching at St. Paul School of Theology, offers still another approach to inductive sermons. The major argument of his ground-breaking book, *The Homiletical Plot*, is that the sermon is a narrative that involves not so much the assembly of parts (11) but rather the discerning of process. He says “a sermon is a plot (premeditated by the preacher) which has as its key ingredient a sensed discrepancy, a homiletical bind. Something is ‘up in the air’—an issue not resolved. . . . Preaching is storytelling. A sermon is a narrative art form” (12). Lowry suggests every sermon would do well to focus on the homiletical bind, the tension that results from the discrepancy between text and life (14), or, specifically for sermons, the tension between the sermonistic bind and the knowledge that Jesus is the answer (24). But how, exactly, is Jesus the answer? This question provides suspense and gains the audience’s attention.

For Lowry, the proper movement of a sermon (the homiletical plot!) goes through five stages: 1) upsetting the equilibrium (28-38); 2) analyzing the discrepancy (39-52); 3) disclosing the clue to resolution (of the discrepancy), or “the principle of reversal” that turns the problem on its head (53-73); 4) experiencing the gospel (74-79) in which the gospel is proclaimed effectively as the solution; and 5) anticipating the consequences (80-87), the climax of the sermon, or the call to commitment. He discusses a number of issues, including whether all sermons must have the same form. His answer? No, so long as you preserve the element of ambiguity (90). In the afterword he also entertains the possibility that not all sermons will move through the five stages in the exact sequence (117-121) allowing for more flexibility in the sequencing of stages three, four, and five.

Of course, Lowry operates on the assumption that Jesus made use of some of the same principles and insights that he discusses in *The Homiletical Plot*. Jesus made use of plot in the story of the prodigal son (8). He made use of the homiletical bind in the story of the Pharisee and the Publican (52). Jesus often “‘laid the rug’ before he pulled it out” in the parables, especially in the story of the good Samaritan (66) or the righteous turned out of the kingdom (67). Pointedly,

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *Preaching Like Jesus*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26, 47, 82. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 198. Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 196-202.

<sup>38</sup> Think of how Jesus’ original listeners heard the story of the Pharisee and the Publican in which the Publican was justified and not the Pharisee; or the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the religious leaders of the Jews did not act lovingly, while the despised Samaritan did; or the story of the prodigal son which betrays the wicked, unforgiving heart of the “righteous” older son. The question of plot reversal is key to Lowry’s, *The Homiletical Plot*. See also Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990), 173, on the role of “surprise” in the parables of Jesus.

Lowry says “I believe it fair to characterize the parables of Jesus as noteworthy (among other reasons) in the fact of their inclusion of reversal” (69). In his section on “Other Considerations” (105-115), he points to additional features of Jesus’ preaching and teaching that are consistent with his thesis. In summary, Lowry assumes that Jesus made use of those features he has identified, and his assumptions appear to be grounded in fact. Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus was so successful was his ability to maintain a level of ambiguity and deliver the punch line at the end, not at the beginning. That is both the nature of inductive preaching and the natural outcome of a narrative, story line.

Preaching the Word to the contemporary World is a project always in process and sometimes it is necessary to stop and rethink what we are doing. Retrospectively, the changes brought about by the New Homiletic now seem almost inevitable. Tom Long explains Craddock’s impact:

The American church had grown weary of the grandiloquent pulpit princes with their big voices and their so-called biblical principles and their dramatic gestures and their teachy sermons and their overblown moral lessons. The times were ripe for change, and along comes Craddock with his winsome style and different voice and ability to see the New Testament churches just like the churches down the road, telling stories about milking cows and chance conversations on airplanes. Craddock sounded less like pulpit royalty and more like a wise man on a country porch, and his sermons moved on the refreshing winds of everyday stories.<sup>39</sup>

Today, we are well beyond the initial thrill with narrative preaching. Indeed, voices of criticism have called for rethinking the rethinking. Long, in his reassessment of narrative preaching, notes two critics in particular: James Thompson, professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University, and Charles Campbell, professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary.<sup>40</sup>

Thompson, in *Preaching Like Paul*, offers several criticisms, two of which will be noted here. He admits that “the new homiletic was a needed corrective to a preaching tradition that had turned the sermon into an academic lecture . . . .”<sup>41</sup> However, he notes, and rightly so, that the move towards inductive preaching “*functions best in a Christian culture in which listeners are well informed of the Christian heritage. . . .* [and that now] people have little knowledge of biblical content.”<sup>42</sup> More importantly, he argues that narrative preaching has missed the contributions of Pauline preaching which included, among other features, a “*plain style . . . deductive argumentation . . . [and] rhetorical turns of phrase in numerous places.*”<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Campbell, in *Preaching Jesus*, offers a substantive complaint, noting hermeneutical and

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<sup>39</sup> Long, “What Happened to Narrative Preaching?” 10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. He finds seven shortcomings in narrative preaching See 9-14 for his list.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

theological problems with the way narrative preaching seeks to join together “the biblical story and the hearers’ stories.”<sup>44</sup> He complains “all too often the stories [i.e., from the “contemporary world”] end up being related in good, liberal fashion; the biblical story is too often ‘translated’ into the independent, purportedly ‘broader’ world of human or cultural experience.”<sup>45</sup>

Was narrative preaching, then, a false start? Were expository preachers wise never to get on the New Homiletic bandwagon to begin with? As with many such scholarly disagreements, there is a great deal more to consider than is obvious at first glance. Reflecting on the criticisms of narrative preaching, Tom Long writes:

At its best, the narrative impulse in preaching grows out of a deep sense of the character, shape, and epistemology of the gospel. If preaching is a sacramental meeting place between the church and the word, the hearers and the gospel, then the substance of preaching is shaped by scripture and by human experience under the sign of grace, and both of these aspects call for narration. If we are to be faithful to the biblical testimony, we will not always speak in a narrative voice—humanity does not live by narrative alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God—but finally we are compelled to tell the Story and the stories of the God who has acted mightily in many and diverse ways and most profoundly in the raising of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.<sup>46</sup>

With these caveats, it is appropriate to note that teaching the Bible through the sermon is not peculiar to print-age communication—it is part of the biblical standard of preaching. Nor is logical arrangement peculiar to modernity. Aristotle “invented” formal logic as we know it, but he was not the first person ever to think logically. Inductive preaching, then, is neither opposed to teaching the Bible nor to thinking clearly about sermon structure. It simply accomplishes both goals through means other than those used in deductive preaching.

### **Narrative AND Exposition**

We have looked at two different forms of preaching, deductive and inductive, with the intended goal of moving to yet a “third way.” That third way, in light of the shift from print-age preaching to digital-age preaching, incorporates the insights of narrative preaching into expository preaching as exemplified in Calvin Miller’s *Preaching: The Art of Narrative*

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 147.

Interestingly enough, Sinclair Ferguson offers a similar complaint that much Gospel preaching (presumably preached by Reformed or, at least, evangelical expositors) is “about ‘people in the Gospels’ rather than about Jesus Christ who is the gospel. The real question the preacher has been interested in asking and answering, is not ‘How do we find Christ in this Gospel?’ but ‘Where am I in this story? What have I go to do?’” Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament,” *PT Media Paper 2* (London: PT Media, 2002), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, 147.

<sup>46</sup> Long, “What Happened to Narrative Preaching?” 13.

*Exposition*.<sup>47</sup> Miller was a Baptist minister (d. 2012) and professor of preaching and practical ministry at Beeson Divinity School. His expressed purpose for writing this volume was “the realization that none of the books on preaching—even the great books—have done it exactly right” (10). For Miller, preaching must be “passionate” and “fascinating” (12). He was concerned that “preaching remains too captive to 1950 to transform the third millennium” (16). While interested in the affective dimension of preaching (220), he did not want preaching merely to be “fluffy and vaporous” (17). He wanted to help preachers in the third millennium adapt to the postmodern world, a world of dialogue and conversation, not lecture (17).

In setting forth his agenda, Miller objects<sup>48</sup> to much of what passes as “expository preaching” which he describes as “sermons that employed linear reasoning, building arguments with highly propositional styles” (20). Concerning such preaching, he says:

If preaching did not defy your ability to care about it, it was clearly not the Word of God. To be really good for you, sermons had to be dull. Exciting sermons were generally seen as heretical, or at least non-biblical. Many people secretly felt that this “expository” style of preaching was boring, but nobody would say so out loud for fear of being branded as a liberal. Many felt that liberals were more interesting than conservative expositors, but people generally opted to be bored, rather than heretical (19-20).

It is at this point that Miller appeals to Jesus, noting that our Lord “himself told lots of stories, and his sermons were full of images—image-driven, to be precise” (21). This is a theme to which he returns frequently, namely, that Jesus was a story-teller and master communicator (21, 53-4, 67, 149, 159, 170, 262), “the preacher’s best role model” (224).

Clearly there are benefits to both expository preaching and to the various narrative forms (and we have only considered a couple!). What about Miller’s proposal, then, to join narrative and exposition? Miller, concerned about “right-brained auditors and left-brained auditors all listening to the same sermon,” (149) explains his approach to narrative exposition: “I like thinking of the best mixture of precept and story as a ‘Dagwood sandwich’ of precepts and various sermon forms all stacked together” (150). For Miller, there is still a logical structure underlying the “Dagwood.” In *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, he diagrams his proposal in a vertical fashion; if diagrammed horizontally, the elements (and order of those elements) appear as follows:

**Text> Narrative> Propositions> Supporting Scriptures> Narrative> Statistics> Narrative> Adages> Narrative> Poem> Application> Altar.**<sup>49</sup>

His proposal for narrative exposition addresses many of the issues created by generational

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<sup>47</sup> Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Though the author is gone, the book remains and so I will use the present tense.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 150. His model is, to some degree, a “plug-and-play” model that will vary in “contents and application” from one sermon to the next, 151.

change, diverse learning styles, and preferences for left or right brain functions (204-5).<sup>50</sup>

Miller explains that there are six literary forms that can be used to create sermonic forms. He lists as sermonic forms (151): Narrative text (“stories that illustrate the text”), Poem text (“emotionalizes the application of the text”), Statistic text, Supporting Scriptures text (relevant portions of Scripture “that offer further illustration of the sermon text”), Story text (“third person story illustrating the text”), and Personal illustration text (“a confessional tale in which preachers relate their own life events to demonstrate the text”). For Miller, these forms are mixed and sequenced as needed and non-narrative forms may be sandwiched between narrative sections. What is important is that “precept and story share equally in comprising the sermon’s communiqué” (151).

Miller is very concerned that the preacher not preach in a vacuum, but rather must know the congregation thoroughly. The preacher, then, must have an eye on more than the text; he must remember the context of his preaching.<sup>51</sup> Certainly there is a general sense in which knowing parishioners by name and being familiar with their struggles, their vocations, and their family members is a worthy goal. Before exegeting the text, the preacher must exegete the congregation.

This focus, at first, is quite broad.<sup>52</sup> A good preacher has some sense of the worldviews of his parishioners and is aware of the “necessities and capacities of the hearers.” But Miller narrows the focus, and makes the startling observation that “half of those who enter the church and take their seat before the pulpit are moving in a privatized fog of their own ills” (41). He calls upon the preacher to know the make-up of the congregation (43), to know what THEY believe (44) and what they know about God (45) in order to help them address THEIR issues (45-7). Miller contends they are not interested in abstractions or generalizations, but in finding significance (52-54),<sup>53</sup> “coping with pain” (54), and hearing words of reconciliation and hope (58-60).

For Miller, each sermon must answer three questions: Is it about Christ? Is it about the Bible? Is it about the listeners? He specifically addresses three forms of propositional preaching based on types of Scripture texts: precepts (66), narrative (67), and poetic (68). He insists it is a mistake to claim that narrative preaching cannot be expository. He cites Jesus as the key example

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<sup>50</sup> Some of these issues are addressed in this series of articles, “From Print-Age Preach to Digital-Age Preaching.” Others are addressed in my D.Min. dissertation, *Covenantal Preaching: Toward a Theology of Word and World* (D.Min. diss., Erskine Theological Seminary, 2009), especially in chapter three, “Our Changing World,” and chapter four, “The Changing Listener.”

<sup>51</sup> O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 41, cautions: “Before stepping into the pulpit, the preacher must be fully immersed in the matrix of conversations that is central to the mission of the community of faith and to the meaning-making process of its individual members.”

<sup>52</sup> As Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching*, 69, explains, “we want to consider our audience from two perspectives: culture in general and the particular audience to whom we speak.”

<sup>53</sup> Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, 52, notes, “there are only two kinds of neurotics: those who admit to it and those who live all their lives in the pinch of cover-up.”

of one who did narrative exposition (67), for “he often followed a precept with an expository story that exposed the truth of his precepts” (67). And for Miller, the role of story is essential, claiming that “sermons are remembered only if they contain enough pictures to be stored” (145) and “storytelling is not only the best form of getting and keeping attention, it is also a great teacher” (147).

At the end of it all, Miller reminds the preacher that “every sermon is a trip—a movement from where we are to where we ought to be” (202). In order to facilitate this, he gives five guidelines: 1) “Keep the audience together as you travel” (204) and this includes the old, the young; the right-brained and left-brained; 2) “Read the feedback” (206) throughout the sermon to see if you are connecting with the listeners; 3) “Learn to pace the delivery” (209) to maintain the conversational style; 4) “Live with the ups and downs of week-to-week preaching” (210) and recognize that everyone “preaches a ‘dawg’ or two” (210) occasionally; and, 5) “Preach over the long haul to create community” (212). Miller challenges the traditional expository sermon and encourages all preachers to aim higher with narrative exposition.

Clearly for preachers who are accustomed to preaching traditional print-age sermons this could be a good first step towards the digital age. But some may be willing to take a bigger risk! If so, Paul Wilson’s *Imagination of the Heart* provides a more radical break with linear structure. Wilson, a professor of homiletics at Victoria University, Toronto, Canada, offers a series of thoughtful reflections that are designed to help the busy pastor bracket his sermon preparation over the course of a week. Chapter four, “Story and Doctrine,” represents Wednesday’s activities and addresses what the preacher might do on that day. He introduces the chapter in these words: “Some things do not change, and the need for preaching to be relevant, to reach into the life experiences of the congregation . . . remains as constant as the ticking of the town clock.”<sup>54</sup>

With this introduction, Wilson provides a unique angle of vision on sermon structure that finds a place both for story and for doctrinal truth. In other words, he says there is room for both narrative and exposition. Indeed, not only is there room; both of these are absolutely necessary for biblical preaching.

### *Story and Doctrine*

Wilson begins by defining story as “*a sequence of events or images that employs plot, character, and emotion*. Plot gives it direction; character gives it humanity; and emotion gives it people in relationship” (147, emphasis his). This is a fairly standard and complete definition of story and encompasses the life of every human being. Everyone has a story; every congregation has a story; even God’s plan for redemption is a story. In fact, it is **the** all-encompassing story.<sup>55</sup> Wilson defines doctrine as “*the statements, assertions, or teachings of the church about particular aspects of Christian faith*” (147, emphasis his). He compares story and doctrine using

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 143. Since chapter four will be used extensively in this section, page numbers will be cited in the text in parentheses.

<sup>55</sup> Fred B. Craddock, “Story, Narrative, and Metanarrative,” in *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 95, writes “for the gospel to be the gospel, there must be a master narrative, a frame of reference in which life, relationships, Jesus, church, and history are set.”



language that is similar to what I have identified as print-age thinking/preaching and digital-age thinking/preaching. Doctrine “is sometimes characterized as linear or convergent thought, converging on a particular point or idea, as opposed to the non-linear, imagistic, or divergent thought pattern of narrative that casts a web of thoughts in a variety of directions” (148).

At this point, Wilson raises two significant issues that are consistent with issues raised earlier. First, he notes that there is a “need to seek a balance between story and doctrine in our preaching” because it is “the whole person we are seeking to address” (148).<sup>56</sup> This observation comes in the context of an admittedly “overly simplistic” discussion of left and right brain distinctions (148). Wilson does not stop with a desire for preaching to whole persons, but extends this application to the entire congregation. “Preaching must value and reach out to embrace the whole body of Christ, those who respond most readily to story and those who respond most readily to doctrinal formulation. Every congregation needs both story and doctrine in order for everyone to be addressed; thus every preacher benefits from being informed by the two” (149).<sup>57</sup> The value of balancing story and doctrine may be seen in the mutual interplay and “testing” that occurs between “our scriptural interpretations and our life experiences with doctrine” and “our doctrines with the Bible story and the stories of our lives” (149). He recommends parity, “a rough fifty-fifty” balance as the preacher’s goal.

But there is a big question that remains. How will these dynamics be brought together? Wilson suggests one possibility: “The familiar idea of a sermon outline that identified key points, subpoints, and their illustrations represents a doctrine-centered approach. Logical order of points is primary. Stories of necessity are ‘slotted in’ to assist the development of a point, but never to make a point in their own right or to have doctrine serve the story” (170). He rejects this possibility as too static. Instead, he argues that “preaching is not just information, it is an event. Each sermon or homily may have its own unique form, reflecting the uniqueness of each encounter with God’s Word. To some extent this form will be suggested by the form of the text” (172).

In place of the traditional model with story forms inserted, Wilson suggests a circular model that allows the text itself to determine the direction of the sermon. He explains:

The circle in some ways will mirror the route of the hermeneutical circle we took to understand the biblical text and may in some ways suggest the circular route to understanding the congregation will take in arriving at our understanding. We start by briefly identifying our major concern of the text and/or major concern of the sermon/homily, move through the law to the heart of the good news (i.e., the reversal, which is the detailed development of the

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching*, in Abingdon Preacher’s Library, ed. William D. Thompson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 45 writes that “the biblical story is told in forms which appeal to the imaginations of our hearts, which call forth the **total response** (emphasis mine) of our personalities . . .” Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, p. 108, says both “poetry” and “precision” are needed.

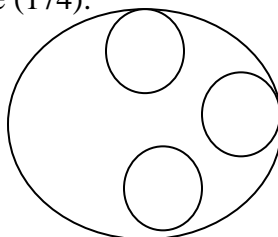
<sup>57</sup> Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, offers another, complementary perspective. He writes on 33: “To hold peoples’ attention you don’t have to know the itsy-bitsy ins and outs of all schools of knowledge. But the center of world thinking should be a matter of continual observation and study.” Miller’s approach resonates well with a Reformed, “two books” view, i.e., knowing God through both general revelation and special revelation.

major concern of the sermon/homily), and then back through the gospel to a new understanding of the world under Christ and a concluding statement of the major concern of the text and/or the major concern of the sermon/homily.

The first thing that comes to mind as one reads this quotation is Wilson's underlying Lutheran hermeneutic, Law/Gospel. The second is Wilson's agreement with other renowned homiletics. In these words, one hears echoes of Fred Craddock's concern that the congregation travel along the path of discovery with the preacher, Gene Lowry's homiletical plot and reversal, and David Buttrick's concern for "moves" rather than "points."

Wilson further explains it is likely that the preacher, as he moves from the text to the congregation, will spiral in and out of the circle in what he calls a "text-situation unit," or a "loop" (174). "The number of loops will vary from text to text . . . Each loop constitutes a development of a concern of the text and a development of a concern of the sermon/homily" (174). This he considers to be the "flow of any biblical sermon or homily" (175).

Wilson offers this diagram of his structure (174):



Within the overall loop (larger circle) of the sermon are the text-situation units (smaller circles) which, with skill, will develop into a flow with "beat, rhythm, tempo, and the like" (176).<sup>58</sup> The number of loops will depend on the particular text.<sup>59</sup> The amount of time devoted to each may vary and the preacher may switch from narrative to doctrine as needed,<sup>60</sup> while trying to strike "an overall balance between the story and the doctrine" (185). Wilson gives a number of additional guidelines for enabling a connection between story and doctrine. He has described this connection as a spark: "It is the spark that occurs when our experience is illuminated by doctrine or when doctrine illuminates our experience" (187).

Wilson's model is quite flexible and allows for tailoring to meet the need of each text. Since there is no prescribed number of loops or "amount" of time devoted to story and doctrine

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<sup>58</sup> See Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer, eds., *Preaching as Image, Story, and Idea* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1998), 1-2 for helpful comments on music as a metaphor for preaching.

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly enough, for a number of years I have been using a *daisy* as a model for sermon structure, suggesting that the center of the daisy represented the main thought, or "big idea," while the various petals (numbered as needed according to the text) represent the looping movement from text to context. I had not read Wilson at the time I first employed the daisy and am pleased that someone else is further along in developing a similar model.

<sup>60</sup> Ralph L. Lewis with Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching* (Westchester: Crossway, 1983), 117, says the preacher "must incorporate a combined approach . . . to achieve maximum effectiveness and involvement." His reference here is to inductive and deductive elements in a sermon—in other words, story and doctrine!

respectively, the preacher has a great deal of freedom to adapt the sermon to the needs of the particular congregation. Though Wilson frames the model with the Lutheran Law/Gospel hermeneutic, even this underlying framework is capable of being viewed in other ways, such as bad news-good news, judgment-grace, or problem-solution. This is not to imply that the sermon always will consist of two movements or two loops. The number of loops depends on the text. Rather, Wilson uses the Law/Gospel hermeneutic to help the preacher “to lean more into the future, to claim Christ’s future promise as it meets us in the present” (94). He reminds us that “we fail to bear even that which is bearable. *Gospel, on the other hand, at its simplest level places the burden on God, and God has already accepted that burden in Jesus Christ*” (107, emphasis his). It is not hard to see how other homiletic devices, such as Bryan Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus,” can be employed in the story/doctrine model.

### *Integrity and the Text*

Wilson has indicated that the form of the sermon is dependent on the text. The fact is, good preaching, biblical preaching, is not only biblical in content; it must be biblical in form. Leander Keck writes: “preaching is biblical when (a) the Bible governs the content of the sermon and when (b) the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text. In other words, preaching is biblical when it imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way.”<sup>61</sup> This theme has been heard before, has it not? Keck offers at least two guiding principles that are necessary to preaching in a Bible-like way, both of which are consistent with Wilson’s story/doctrine proposal: 1) respecting the authentic voice of the text, and 2) recognizing the genre of the text.

The first is simply this: let your exegesis control the message of the text, not your theological system. There is a proper place for systems of theology, and as one who serves the church as a teacher of theology, I would never minimize the importance of the discipline. Indeed, as a Reformed theologian, I believe it is appropriate to speak of “a system of doctrine” in the Scriptures, a *fides quae creditur* that is shared by all the apostles and authors of Scripture. Nevertheless, each author needs to be heard in his own authentic accent, for “it is a fundamental task of exegesis to identify the specific and particular content that each writer gives . . . so that Paul is not confused with anyone else . . . .”<sup>62</sup> When James speaks about faith and works, he does not teach anything that is contrary to Paul’s teaching; however, his emphasis is different and his voice must not be mistaken for Paul’s.

The second is just as important, but more complicated. The text—indeed, the genre of the text—needs to control the form of the sermon. However, as Jeffrey Arthurs has written, “There is No Such Thing as The Sermon Form!”<sup>63</sup> In fact, each genre needs to be treated with respect and

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<sup>61</sup> Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 106.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching With Variety* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 16. He explains further: “The defining essence of an expository sermon lies primarily in its content, not its form.” This is a welcome development, though a departure from some traditional definitions.

allowed to have its own voice—and shape the sermon accordingly.<sup>64</sup> As Wilson has stated it, “Each sermon or homily may have its own unique form, reflecting the uniqueness of each encounter with God’s Word. To some extent this form will be suggested by the form of the text. Not that preaching on an epistle needs to take the form of an epistle or that preaching on a psalm must be a psalm.”<sup>65</sup>

Tom Long echoes a similar concern in his introductory remarks in chapter one of *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. He writes that preachers who pay attention to their texts “have long sensed that a sermon based upon a psalm, for example, ought somehow to be different from one that grows out of a miracle story.”<sup>66</sup> To this end, the preacher must ask all of the usual questions about exegesis that he was taught in seminary—and more! Ronald Allen explains the importance of text/genre to the sermon:

Although the Bible itself may have an overarching narrative structure, within the Bible are a multitude of genres of literature such as commandments, proverbs, riddles, oracles of judgment and salvation, letters, codes of virtues and vices, and apocalyptic visions. As noted previously philosophers of language, rhetoricians, and linguists note that the form or genre of a text is a part and part of the meaning of the text. To change the form of communication of a text is to change meaning.<sup>67</sup>

In his book on literary forms, Long discusses how to preach several biblical genres, including: psalms, proverbs, narratives, parables, and epistles.<sup>68</sup> Once the preacher has “identified the genre of the text,” (25) he needs to understand how that text functioned as heard by its original listeners and then address the task of the sermon now. “The preacher’s task, though, is not to replicate the text . . . to say and do everything the text once said and did. Rather, the preacher should attempt to say and do what a *portion* of the text *now* says and does for a new and unique set of people”

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<sup>64</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 104, writes: “Noticing the instrument that God has used to communicate himself in a given biblical text does not enslave the preacher to a particular form, but it does model how God preaches.”

<sup>65</sup> Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*, 172.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 11.

<sup>67</sup> Ronald J. Allen, “Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching,” in *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 37-8.

<sup>68</sup> Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 5, “Table of Contents.” For preaching parables, especially important as sources of narrative preaching, see Eugene L. Lowry, *How To Preach A Parable*, in Abingdon Preacher’s Library (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); for a more recent approach, see Brian C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

(emphasis his).<sup>69</sup> In other words, the preacher must connect Word and World in order for communication to occur.

### **Toward a Theology of Word and World**

When all has been said, the Christian community can rest comfortably in the thought that we have ample warrant for preaching **and** teaching, for *kerygma* **and** *didache*, for expository preaching **and** narrative, for deductive **and** inductive structures in our preaching and worship. We can embrace the truths of Scripture and drink deeply from the Living Water. And we can learn from those who have spent much energy and employed great creativity learning how to preach well in our digital age. There is no virtue in having a high view of Scripture, and therefore having more to say in a sermon, if you have not learned to say it well and communicate effectively.

Those who have never preached an inductive sermon should try one on for size. Others, whose sermons always consist of a thesis and a series of propositions, might experiment with narrative for a change. Some might even be so bold as to try Miller's narrative exposition or Wilson's story/doctrine loop. As some pundit once said, if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Perhaps it is time for preachers to consider expanding their tool kits even as they reaffirm their commitment to expounding the Word. Humility and a teachable spirit, not triumphalism and sloganeering, enable us to become better preachers.

#### *Summary*

In the past four decades, the voices of homileticians and preachers have been "Legion." There have been so many competing proposals for preaching that, at first glance, the prospect of consensus appears slim. But there is good reason for confidence! In the biblical notion of covenant, God says to his people, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Each time this address comes, it comes to a particular people, in a specific location in time and space, and brings to bear certain norms that define their faithful behavior as God's covenant people. It always comes as the eternally true, yet situationally relevant, revelation of God to his covenant people. Faithful preaching, then, is the preaching that addresses the people of God with the Word of God in the World in which God has placed them. In the words of Clarence Walhout, "Truth appeals to the mind, proclamation to the heart, which in biblical usage means the totality of a person's being. . . [Christianity's] aim is not first of all to offer rational certitude; rather it proclaims a message that speaks to human life in all its dimensions."<sup>70</sup>

And, in spite of the cacophony of voices, a moment's reflection reminds us there are some principles that are *shared* by homileticians representing different theological perspectives and theories of communication—and spanning generations. In addressing the question, "how does your model differ from preaching and illustrating as it has always been done?," Calvin Miller responds that "it differs not at all from great preaching as it has always been done, with

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 33, emphasis in original.

<sup>70</sup> Clarence Walhout, "Christianity, History, and Literary Criticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no.2 (Summer, 1994): 435.

this exception: the emphasis on story is far stronger than that traditionally put on the sermon.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, all good preaching, whether narrative, expository, or narrative expository, has certain features in common. The following list is not intended to be exhaustive.

First, the sermon will be based on some text of Scripture. There may be debate over the length of the text or the manner of selecting the text. Some may prefer lectionary preaching (*lectio selecta*) while others may prefer to preach through books of the Bible in course (*lectio continua*). However, nearly everyone agrees that the preacher is to preach the Word. While other literature or media may be used in a supporting role, there is a solid consensus that sermons are based on texts of Scripture.

Second, there is widespread agreement among homileticians of all stripes that the preacher must expend the effort required to understand the text fully. Such effort requires exegesis of the text and may involve the use of original language texts, comparative translations, word study tools, Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and the like. Before moving to the meaning of the sermon, the preacher must first understand the meaning of the text. Furthermore, the meaning of the text does not exist in isolation. Rather, the text exists among other texts of similar genre as well as in the larger context of the particular book of the Bible, its location in the canonical text, and its role in the unfolding of redemptive history.

Third, the text cannot be understood apart from the preacher and the congregation. Phillips Brooks long ago said that preaching is “the bringing of truth through personality.”<sup>72</sup> It is a living, thinking, seeking human being who incarnates the grace of God and who, in turn, tells of that grace to others. The preacher is one of the people of God who has been called by God and set aside by the church to proclaim God’s word to the church. Each particular church consists of individuals, couples, and families who experience the challenges of life. Health issues, relationship problems, family dysfunctions, employment concerns, financial hardships, vocational uncertainties are among the many possible problems that parishioners drag into the worship service each Sunday.<sup>73</sup> The preacher must read the biblical text in light of the congregational context. Good preaching involves a particular word from a particular preacher to a particular group of people with particular problems at a particular time and place.

Fourth, and with all due allowance for the various ways this is expressed, our sources all maintain that every sermon has a purpose statement, or a central theme; a single “Big Idea,” or a “Fallen Condition Focus.” No good sermon says everything, though every good sermon says something. It is that something, that one message that God has for his covenant people the preacher must say to this congregation at this time that provides the unifying center for the sermon. This one thing is the “glue” that holds the sermon together, without which the sermon fails to meet the standard of preaching—by anyone’s definition of preaching.

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<sup>71</sup>Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, 151.

<sup>72</sup> Phillip Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (1907; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 5.

<sup>73</sup> Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, 41, “The Sunday service is a gathering of troubles. Half of those who enter the church and take their seat before the pulpit are moving in a privatized fog of their own ills. In the words of Thoreau, they are living lives of quiet desperation. They are the dying anonymous.” See also R. J. Gore Jr., “Preaching on Special Occasions,” *Journal of Modern Ministry*, 6:3 (Fall, 2009): 185-196.

Fifth, the preacher must seek to do more in the sermon than inform the congregation or provide entertainment for an allotted time. Through the sermon, the preacher seeks to move the parishioner to believe, to be transformed, to step out in faith, to repent and to believe.<sup>74</sup> Our authorities all agree that the preacher who simply sets forth information or tells a few good stories falls short of the biblical model of preaching, even if they do not agree completely on how to integrate story and doctrine. Miller asks, “Can biblical narrative, as a style of preaching, be expository? Can preaching—narrative style—really be expository?” And his answer? Yes, he says: “Jesus thought so.”<sup>75</sup> It is essential that the Scriptures be taught and that God’s people understand his Word. However, as we have been warned repeatedly by many different voices from many different perspectives, that does not mean that only a single homiletical style or sermon structure is capable of bearing truth.<sup>76</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this third and final paper in the series, “From Print-Age Preaching to Digital-Age Preaching,” we have explored deductive preaching, inductive preaching, and a possible “third way.” There are two proposals that promise to get us beyond the deductive/inductive impasse and enable us to preach the unchanging Word to our ever-changing World: Calvin Miller’s narrative exposition, and Paul Wilson’s story/doctrine loop. Miller offers a significant advance on traditional expository preaching, and Wilson’s balance provides the structure needed for preaching story effectively. These might be the new wineskins we need; perhaps these forms are the epiphany for which we have been waiting!

Miller and Wilson invite us to walk between the New Homiletic and the old expositors, to do narrative exposition in a fresh way, to take the best that each has to offer to provide the blend that just might break through to our digital-age listeners—while not losing our print-age parishioners in the process. Miller and Wilson have not said the final word, but by finding a way to bind truth and experience, and address digital-age natives as well as digital-age tourists, they

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<sup>74</sup> See the discussion on “the Holy Spirit’s purpose in writing a portion of the Scriptures,” or “*what he intends to do the reader*” and the how this should affect the preacher’s use of Scripture in his sermon, in Jay Adams, *Truth Apparent* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1982), 10.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Sinclair Ferguson makes the startling observation that for many of the best preachers, preaching is more instinctive than the product of careful, scholarly reflection. He writes, “Some men might struggle to give a series of lectures on how they go about preaching. Why? Because what they have developed is an instinct; preaching biblically has become their native language. They are able to use the grammar of biblical theology, without reflecting on what part of speech they are using. That is why the best preachers are not necessarily the best instructors in homiletics, although they are, surely, the greatest inspirers of true preaching.” Ferguson, “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament,” 6.

have moved us closer to a theology of Word and World that can work in the twenty-first century—if we have an ear to hear, that is!<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Or, for digital-age readers, eyes to see!