

Preaching: Content and Form (Part 1)

After adequately exploring both text and context, the preacher should be ready to determine a clear focus (in one sentence, what are you trying to say?) and function (in one sentence, what are you trying to do?) for the homily/reflection.

Thomas G. Long, in *The Witness of Preaching* (86), defines Form and Function as follows:

A focus statement is a concise description of the central, controlling, and unifying theme of the sermon. In short, this is what the whole sermon will be “about.”

A function statement is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a deepening of something already present). The function statement names the hoped for change.

In writing these statements, God is usually the subject of the focus statement and we are usually the subject of the function statement. Three principles guide the crafting of the focus and function statements:

1. They should grow directly out of the exegesis of the biblical text (literal meaning as well as *sensus plenior*)
2. They should be related to each other.
3. They should be clear, unified, and relatively simple.

Homiletic form refers to “an organizational plan for deciding what kind of things will be said [focus] and done [function] in a sermon and in what sequence” (Long, 93). Homiletic form is determined by two factors: (1) the genre (shape, form) of the text(s) being proclaimed, and (2) the way that the particular assembly “listens” to preaching. In other forms, determining homiletic form is a decision regarding rhetorical strategy.

Until the last half of the twentieth century, typical preaching was deductive—or propositional—in style. Following a logical outline, the “sermon” was more akin to a lecture than a conversation. Moving from the general to the specific, deductive preaching takes a “top-down” approach in arguing for or trying to prove a point or points. Deductive preaching has been criticized for being authoritarian in approach and often only tangentially related to the scriptural text(s). In the latter half of the last century, homileticians turned their attention to the place of the listener in preaching. In other words, they have sought to structure preaching in a way that corresponds to the way that we naturally converse: inductively. Inductive preaching moves from the specific to the general, and unfolds in a narrative fashion; it is reflective of a more communal model of ministry and more intimately connected to the scriptural texts.

According to Thomas Long, the following steps should be followed in determining what form a homily should take:

1. Start with the focus and function
2. Divide these larger tasks into smaller components
3. Decide the sequence in which these tasks should be done

Deductive

Deductive preaching follows a typical “term paper” outline: major points, each with sub-points in support of or illustrating the general statement. Often, the major points are only tenuously connected to each other, producing a homily that lacks overall coherence and unity.

Inductive

Inductive preaching attempts to approach preaching with the listener in mind, structuring the homily so that it corresponds to the way that we naturally converse. Inductive preaching moves from the specific to the general, and unfolds in a narrative fashion; it is reflective of a more communal model of ministry and more intimately connected to the scriptural texts. Inductive preaching is reflective of the performative nature of language; preaching makes space for an encounter; it forms and transforms—not merely informs. There are a number of inductive forms available to the preacher, and a number of homilicians have written on this issue; we will review them in the next issue.