

PREACHING WITH **Variety**

Other books in the Preaching With series:

Preaching with Conviction, by Kenton C. Anderson

Preaching with Freshness, by Bruce Mawhinney

Preaching with Integrity, by Kenton C. Anderson

Preaching with Passion, by Alex Montoya

Preaching with Relevance, by Keith Willhite

PREACHING WITH Variety

*How to Re-create the Dynamics
of Biblical Genres*

JEFFREY D. ARTHURS

 Kregel
Academic & Professional

Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres

© 2007 by Jeffrey D. Arthurs

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501. Kregel Publications provides trusted, biblical publications for Christian growth and service. Your comments and suggestions are valued.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arthurs, Jeffrey D.

Preaching with variety : how to re-create the dynamics of biblical genres / by Jeffrey D. Arthurs.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Preaching—Biblical teaching. I. Title.

BV4221.A78 2007

251-dc22

2006103429

ISBN: 978-0-8254-2019-1

Printed in the United States of America

07 08 09 10 11 / 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife:
My proofreader,
a student of the Word,
and the most delightful person I know.

Contents

Illustrations	9
Foreword	11
Introduction: 9.5 Theses	13
1. The Great Communicator	21
2. Speaking Bantu to Channel Surfers	29
3. Psalms: The Sound of Music	38
4. Narrative, Part 1: Everyone Loves a Story	62
5. Narrative, Part 2: Everyone Loves a Story	85
6. Parables: Hidden Land Mines	102
7. Proverbs: Short Sentences Long Remembered	129
8. Epistles: One Side of a Conversation	151
9. Apocalyptic Literature: Vision and Victory	178
Epilogue	201
Notes	203
Bibliography	221

Illustrations

3.1. The “Emotional Shape” of Psalm 77	53
4.1. The Five Stages of Plot	70
4.2. Selectivity and Arrangement as Techniques of Point of View	81
5.1. Monroe’s Motivated Sequence Applied to Genesis 22	88
5.2. Lowry’s Homiletical Plot Applied to Luke 19	89
6.1. Parables and Fields of Experience	114
6.2. A Comparison of Simile and Metaphor	115
8.1. Percent of “Preformed Material” in Paul’s Epistles	160
8.2. Time and Money Invested to Produce a NT Epistle	163
8.3. Communication Methods and Recall	167
9.1. Interpreted Symbols in Revelation	186

Foreword

Preachers sometimes get bored with their own preaching. It's the regularity that dulls us. On some Sundays we speak because we are expected to say something and not because we have something to say. In addition, we get bored with preaching the Bible because we treat the Bible as an assortment of texts from which to build sermons. To actually preach with variety and excitement, we must treat the Scriptures as they are—a library of different types of great literature.

Some of the theologians who wrote the Bible communicated their message through stories as gripping as a John Grisham novel. The Bible is inhabited by saints who lived very messy lives. Their family values included polygamy, adultery, incest, lust, rape, even murder. Yet these same people also reflected enormous courage and faith. It is through those very human, sometimes shocking, stories that the holy God revealed himself to us.

Another section of the library contains poetry. The psalmists reflected through their poetry the whole palette of human emotions. The prophets, stern as they were, often presented their messages through poetry. Some realities can only be communicated with images. Because God loves poetry, the preacher must try to appreciate it. The poetry in the Bible can both ignite your spirit and comfort, as well as confront and encourage, your people.

You'll find a collection of proverbs in the Bible that promise to make us wise. Few preachers ever preach from Proverbs, though. We know more about "wise guys" than wise men. It's a shame. Preaching from the literature of Proverbs can change the "worldview" of your people. We need a handle on how to do it.

We also have the parables that Jesus told. They are simple stories that take genius to create. Parables are not illustrations throwing light on some abstract truth. The parable is the truth. A preacher or listener has to work to understand them. It took the disciples years to get the hang of them. If we don't make the effort, Jesus warned, "Hearing they will not hear them." How would you approach a parable? If Jesus used them, shouldn't we?

Then there is "apocalyptic" literature. Even the name of the genre unsettles us. But to begin to appreciate the meaning of Daniel or Revelation, we have to understand the literary form. The heroes and the villains in "apocalyptic" literature seem like creatures that escaped out of a bad nightmare or a horror movie. Yet, we must preach these books. We would welcome some guidance on how to understand and apply them.

Jeff Arthurs introduces us to a variety of literary forms in the Bible and also offers us guidance on how to read and preach them effectively. What he has written, you will find helpful and encouraging. If you invest a few dollars and about five hours of your time to read this book, it may shape you for life and make you better able to preach the Bible—as it is for women and men as they are.

—HADDON W. ROBINSON

Introduction

9.5 THESES

Plant a carrot, get a carrot,
Not a Brussels sprout.
That's why I like vegetables:
You know what you're about.

—*The Fantasticks* (a musical)

It's comforting to know what you'll reap when you plant a garden. It's also comforting to know what you're in for when you begin a book, so allow me to give you a quick tour of the garden in your hands. This book is about biblical preaching. I believe that a sermon's *content* should explain and apply the Word of God as it is found in a biblical text, and a sermon's *form* should unleash the impact of that text. The second part of that declaration is the special province of this book. We should be biblical in how we preach, not just what we preach. To that end, this book describes the rhetorical dynamics of biblical genres and suggests how preachers can reproduce some of those dynamics in their sermons. These descriptions and suggestions help to equip preachers to declare the unchanging Word in ways that are engaging and suited to modern audiences, and to do so by remaining faithful to the text.

To accomplish this goal, chapters 1 and 2 defend my basic theory—that variety in preaching is, indeed, biblical, and it can enhance receptivity. Chapters 3 through 9 then flesh out the application of the theory to the biblical text. Each of these chapters first discusses interpretive concerns, examining the techniques that each genre uses to do what it does. Then, in the “Try This” section, the chapters explore ways to apply the techniques of the biblical text to homiletics. The genres covered are psalm, narrative, parable, proverb, epistle, and apocalyptic.

With deference to brother Martin, allow me to declare 9.5 theses to further clarify the presuppositions of this book.

Thesis 1: A Sermon Must Herald God’s Word or Else It Isn’t a Sermon

In John Stott’s model, preaching is “standing between two worlds”—the world of the text and the world of the listeners. As such, preaching is a bridge that carries the Word into the twenty-first century. The metaphor seems to capture well the essential nature of preaching.

Now a bridge is a means of communication between two places which would otherwise be cut off from one another by a river or a ravine. It makes possible a flow of traffic. . . . Our task is to enable God’s revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of men and women of today.¹

If a sermon doesn’t facilitate this flow, I’m not interested in it. I’ve taught public speaking for years and value a well-crafted speech, but a speech isn’t a sermon. Preachers are heralds who speak on behalf of the King, and their job is to faithfully and skillfully recommunicate what has already been communicated. Thus, when I advocate variety, I propose variety of form, not of subject matter.

Thesis 1 raises the question of definition—what is a sermon? The dynamics of human communication, to say nothing of the dynamics of the impartation of spiritual life, are difficult to capture in definitions.² Thus we often turn to metaphors like *heralding* and *bridge building*.

Nevertheless, what metaphor offers in breadth it loses in precision, so until someone finds a better way to summarize and transmit the concept of preaching, we’re stuck with definitions.³ In this garden, preaching looks like this: *Accurately heralding the Word of God to a particular audience for a particular purpose by explaining, applying, and embodying that message.*

Thesis 2: Some Issues Are More Important than the Topic of This Book

Preaching with variety can add much to your ministry, but without other components, you have no ministry. One of those components is ethos—the persuasive impact of character. Isocrates, the ancient rhetorician, stated, “Who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man’s life is more weight than that which is furnished by words?”⁴

If you are dishonest, lazy, insincere, volatile, or lecherous, preaching with all the variety in the world will not ensure successful ministry. Our Lord says to us, “Watch your life and doctrine closely, because in doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). He does not say, “Watch your sermon forms closely, because in them you find life.” An observer asked Charles Spurgeon’s brother the basis of the great pulpiteer’s success. The brother replied, “I think it lies in the fact that he loves Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus of Nazareth loves him.”⁵

Since words flow out of the overflow of the heart, a clean heart is ten times more important than using a variety of forms to arrange those words. To borrow a phrase from empirical research, preaching with variety is *necessary*, but not *sufficient*. To accurately herald the Word, variety is necessary, but by itself variety is not sufficient to produce spiritual growth.

Another component that overshadows the need for variety is the end, or *telos*, of preaching. To use John Piper’s phrase, the goal of our preaching must be the “supremacy of God.”⁶ Contrast this goal with less noble goals such as growing a church, giving pleasure to listeners, and increasing knowledge of facts. Magnifying God does not, of course, demand that we ignore people (in fact, it demands the

opposite), but the preacher who magnifies God will view all topics, means, and preaching occasions as opportunities to spread his glory. If honorable, yet secondary, ends become idols, we no longer have a ministry worth perpetuating.

Thesis 3: The Topic of This Book Is Still Important

Having argued that some things are more important than variety, I don't want you to throw this book away! Variety is important too. The first two chapters fully present my case, but in brief, how we say something influences how listeners receive it.

Thesis 4: There Is No Such Thing as the Sermon Form

If the use of testimony, music, or parable helps us fulfill our calling to stand between two worlds, we're free to use such forms. If the use of question and answer, story, or object lesson techniques help us glorify God and minister to the listeners, we should feel free to preach with a variety of forms, just as Jesus and other biblical preachers did. The defining essence of an expository sermon lies primarily in its content, not its form.⁷

But thesis 4 needs to be qualified. Some people disagree with it. They believe that preaching *is* marked by a certain form, and they should know! After all, they've heard sermons since they were kids, and they know what preaching sounds like. For some of these folk, a sermon must have three points; for others, the sermon must follow the text verse-by-verse; for others, the sermon must end with an invitation. To these folk, a change of form seems like a change of content. They believe sermons must be delivered within a narrow range of decibels (whether loud or soft), minutes (whether long or short), tone of voice (whether conversational or oratorical), and pulpit style (whether wood or Plexiglas).

So if you drive your homiletical car down a new road, you may be in for a bumpy ride. Davies observes that for many people, preaching is like church bells—an easily recognized and comforting sound that will be tolerated so long as it does not disturb early morning sleep.⁸ Howard adds,

Ruts become routines. Routine, carried on in the local church, tends to become “righteous.” Righteous routine becomes unassailably, uncritically rigid—the best and only way to do things. Along come those who want to make a change in this rigidly righteous routine. They may find out that what they propose to change is something that others are deeply attached to and not about to change. . . . Fierce defenders of the established faith are also often fierce defenders of the established format.⁹

The solution to entrenched taste is neither to brush it off nor allow it to ruffle your feathers. We must patiently help people distinguish between biblical doctrine and communicative procedure,¹⁰ and in the midst of that patient instruction, we can find encouragement in the fact that most North Americans in the twenty-first century have been socialized to expect variety and multiple perspectives. Preachers who would expand their creativity will generally find receptive attitudes. More on that in chapter 2.

Thesis 5: Preaching with Variety Is Not a Fad

Ample warrant for preaching with variety can be found in both the literature of the Bible and the preaching of Jesus. Chapter 1 will expand this thesis. Suffice it here to say that the Bible is a cornucopia of genres and forms and so was Jesus' preaching. The Bible offers the careful reader more clues for the forms of heralding than most of us will ever be able to employ: dialogues, debates, doxologies, letters, lists, laws, parables, proverbs, prayers, hymns, taunts, baptismal formulas, analogies, symbols, visions, mnemonic devices, and more. God has poured out a profusion of rhetorical forms. When we borrow some of those forms to recommunicate the text, we are faithful heralds.

Thesis 6: Variety Should Not Wag the Dog

No gimmicks allowed. Achtemeier warns that “no preacher can show forth simultaneously his or her own cleverness and the lordship of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ As you read this book, remember thesis 2 and the supremacy of God, and remember thesis 1—our goal is to be biblical.

We use variety because the text does. The form of the sermon should reproduce some impact of the form of the text. You fill your quiver with different kinds of arrows to hit different kinds of targets, not to display your prowess as an archer.

Thesis 7: Listeners Could Use Some Variety

Having emphasized the proper role of variety—the glory of God through the communication of the text—I now urge you not to forget the listeners. Preachers bring glory to God by prompting the glad submission of the human heart. At times, though, “listening to an exposition of Scripture is about as exciting as watching house paint dry.”¹² Our listeners deserve better. As they gather to feed on the Word, let us serve our best recipes. Variety can add some zip, spice, and zing to our preaching. Spurgeon said it well: “[Our listeners] must be awake, understanding what we are saying, and feeling its force, or else we may as well go to sleep too.”¹³

Thesis 8: Preachers Could Use Some Variety Too!

Sundays roll around with amazing regularity, don’t they? You may feel like a worker on an assembly line, cranking out sermon after sermon. One survey discovered that pastors preach an average of sixty-four sermons a year and speak 3.4 times per week.¹⁴ Ministerial burnout lurks in those statistics, especially when coupled with the other stresses of the pastorate. As we crank out sermons week after week, year after year, each sermon sounding just like the others, we begin to feel that nothing different ever happens. Once that attitude forms in our hearts (remember that Jesus said we speak out of the fullness of our hearts), dullness creeps into our words. The mode and mood of our speaking becomes dry. A self-perpetuating cycle forms: our preaching is monotonous, monotonous preaching sours our attitude, a sour attitude leads to monotonous preaching, and the cycle continues. Get off the treadmill! It’s time to preach with variety. It could revolutionize your attitude toward your own preaching.

Thesis 9: Preachers Should Minister with Their Strengths

This book will stretch you, but it should not put you on the rack of false guilt. I want this book to unleash you, not unhinge you. I want this book to help you find your stride, go with your pitch, get in a groove, and play within yourself (add your own sports metaphor here). This book gives tools to unleash your gifts; it does not heap on false guilt for failing to use all the latest homiletical bells and whistles. Working from the conviction that preaching is “truth through personality,” I believe that the person of the preacher is indispensable in the process of transmitting God’s Word. Thus, we should feel empowered to allow God to use our personalities, perspectives, and strengths. If you’re a humorous person, be humorous. If you’re organized, be organized. If you’re erudite, be erudite. If you’re quiet, be quiet. God wants to spread His Word through *you*. This book has tools for the warm and pastoral, the imaginative and literary, and the simple and homespun. It will help you communicate from your heart.

It goes without saying that we should not let our strengths become weaknesses (you can be so quiet that no one can hear you), and it goes without saying that preaching is not ultimately about us (see theses 1 and 2), but these caveats do not change the fact that God uses humans to reveal himself. We should joyfully yield to that fact and not put on airs, trying to become something we’re not. If you’re a shepherd boy, don’t try to fight in Saul’s armor. Too many preachers fight against themselves in the pulpit. Be yourself, and find some sermon forms that free you to do that.

Thesis 9.5: Preaching with Variety Is an Attainable Goal

My final half thesis is a self-conscious but sincere pep talk: You can do it! Preaching with variety is not hard. True, you may feel awkward the first time you implement question and answer in your sermon, or open up with self-disclosure, or preach with images more than points, but I think you’ll find the experience freeing and enjoyable. This has been my experience and the experience of my students. Happy are the preachers who look into the eyes of their listeners and see interest and participation. Preaching with variety helps us communicate. Remember that the root of *communication* is *commune*.

The formation of *community* increases when we *communicate* with imagination, feedback, affection, and holistic involvement. This book provides down-to-earth instruction and examples for *communicating* with the souls whom God has appointed us to watch. By God's grace, you can do it.

 1


The Great Communicator

There is a . . . sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are.

—C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure. . . . Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.

—Martin Luther, quoted in Clines, “Story and Poem”

Here is the Son of God using anecdotes, stories, paradoxes, contradictions, humor, irony, question and answer. Is that the stuff of revelation from on high? It is not the performance that gains tenure or renews contracts. Jesus laid himself open to

criticism from even the sophomore class in a rabbinic school, criticism as to scholarship, logic, and systematic consistency. Why did he do it?

—Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*

Why should we preach with variety? Because God himself is the Great Communicator, and part of that greatness is seen in his freshness and creativity. Consider, for instance, the variety of his special revelation, the written Word. The Bible is a cornucopia of literary forms—poetry, law, parable, and story, to name a few. Because God has “taken the trouble” of communicating with such variety, careful exegetes should sit up and take notice. We rejoice in, respond to, and learn from our Lord’s creativity. Chapters 3–9 discuss how we can do that, so I won’t belabor the point here except to say that because the Great Communicator communicates with variety in the Bible, it seems natural that we would mirror that variety in our sermons.

Think, too, about the Lord’s communication through general revelation. Echoing Psalm 19, Calvin called the universe “a dazzling theater,” “a most glorious theater,” and “this magnificent theater of heaven and earth.”¹ The more I learn about nature, the more amazed I am at God’s seemingly infinite demonstration of creativity and variety. Just the other night, as I was studying with my seventh grade son, I learned that the Amazon rainforest hosts 20 million species of insects!² That’s *species*, not individual bugs. This world bursts with an inventive, wise, sometimes wry display of God’s power and glory, and variety is part of that glory. As the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins said, “Glory be to God for dappled things”:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow, sweet, sour, adazzle, dim,
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.³

While preaching with variety is not the only homiletical value, not even the primary value, it certainly has sanction when we consider the variety the Great Communicator employs.

We also know that God’s preachers—that is, the prophets and witnesses—employed variety. In some cases, they did so under direct orders from their Master, as when God ordered Isaiah to go around barefoot for three years to communicate that Sargon would take Egypt and Cush captive (Isa. 20:1–6). God ordered Jeremiah to use a clay pot and a yoke (Jer. 19; 27–28), and he ordered Ezekiel to use object lessons such as miniature siege works, body positions, bread, and a shaved head (Ezek. 4–5). Nathan’s use of parable is well known (2 Sam. 12:1–12), as is Stephen’s use of narrative history (Acts 7). While these examples are not *normative* for all preachers in all times (we are not commanded to shave our heads or use parables), they are *suggestive* of how God’s preachers then and now can respond to various exigencies. Remember, there is no such thing as *the* sermon form. We have freedom, and the variety that biblical preachers used suggests that we should use that freedom.

God the Son certainly communicated with variety. Dialogue, story, visuals, and “lecture” were common in his teaching, which was participatory and image laden. He defined concepts by example more than by creed. Lewis and Lewis have counted 19 questions⁴ and 142 comparisons just in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵ They state, “These metaphors, figures, and likenesses keep stabbing His listeners’ minds and memories into constant alertness.”⁶

It is self-evident, then, that God uses great variety in his communication. The question arises, *Why?* Why does God use poetry and proverbs, stories and visions? Why did the Son of God use parable and objects, monologue and dialogue?

The answer is twofold: because God is both an artist and a persuader. He expresses himself with skill, and he moves audiences with purpose.

God “fathers-forth” beauty because he is beautiful. This attribute is reflected in the artistry of the Bible. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer of Ecclesiastes speaks for all the writers of the Bible: “The Teacher searched to find just the right [or ‘pleasing’] words” (12:10). While individual biblical texts can be placed along a continuum from more aesthetic to less aesthetic, there is in general, as Leland Ryken observes, “a preoccupation among biblical writers with artistry, verbal craftsmanship, and aesthetic beauty.”⁷ Their

writings tend to be affective, concrete, and experiential, showing the truth more than stating the truth in propositional or abstract form. Verbal artistry reflects the Artist, and it creates delight and enjoyment for the reader.

Such artistry also intensifies impact. God's purposes flow out of his character just as artistry does. He is active as well as beautiful. He is building his kingdom, so the verbal artistry of the Bible is not simply art for art's sake; it is art that accomplishes his purposes. Rhetorical goals, not just aesthetic goals, lie behind the beauty and variety of the Bible. John's statements capture, perhaps, the mind-set of all the writers of the Bible: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31); "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

While C. S. Lewis certainly valued the artistry of the Bible, he made it clear that the Bible is more than art for art's sake: "The Bible is so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach."⁸ Ramm makes a similar argument when he claims that the Bible is "not a theoretical book or a book of theological abstractions, but a book that intends to have a mighty influence on the lives of its readers."⁹ The Bible is well viewed, then, as art and as rhetoric. The chapters that follow in this current book will unpack the dynamics of six genres—psalm, narrative, parable, proverb, epistle, and apocalyptic. These literary forms will be viewed as a means of managing a relationship with readers and listeners, moving them toward predetermined beliefs, values, or actions.

Jesus certainly moved his listeners toward these destinations. Rhetorical sensibilities, in fact, permeate Jesus' communication. When asked by an expert in the law to define "neighbor," Jesus told a story (Luke 10:25–37). Why? To accomplish something that would have been difficult to accomplish with another form. He wanted to reframe the discussion, gradually reveal the truth, instruct the lawyer, engage him holistically, lead him to understand his own heart, convince him of his need, convict him of his values, cause him to ponder the truth, and lead him to faith and repentance. The form of Jesus'

communication (parable) was an indispensable component in achieving those goals. For the Great Communicator, form is not simply the husk surrounding the seed, superfluous and cumbersome; it is more like the architectural design of the Vietnam Memorial, inseparable from meaning and impact.

We know intuitively, of course, that form and content go together. Instead of sending an e-mail, for instance, send a singing telegram, and you'll see a difference in how the receiver responds. Instead of shouting at your kids, whisper. The content may be identical, but the impact will be different. Leaf through your mail. Pick up the glossy brochure for a Hawaiian cruise. It shows happy, toned people in crystal blue oceans. The message is packaged as a shimmering vision. Imagine the same ideational content packaged as a one-page business letter, or drawn with crayon.¹⁰ You don't need the artistic sensibilities of Van Gogh to realize that form and content are a unit.

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke explains one way that form functions. It does so by creating and guiding listener experience. Burke defines *form* as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor and the adequate satisfying of that appetite."¹¹ Perhaps the clearest example of creating and satisfying an appetite can be heard in music. Imagine a simple progression of chords—C, F, C, G, C. Because you've heard that progression in a thousand country, rock, and pop songs (not to mention gospel hymns!), you expect the sequence to move that direction and end on the tonal C chord. When it does, you feel resolution. Now imagine the progression ends on G. The sequence is unresolved. This leaves you hovering or feeling hollow. Your desire/expectation was not fulfilled. Now imagine the conclusion of a classical symphony. Previous experience tells you that symphonies end with "Tum, Tum, ta TUM!" but say you're listening to one that ends with an abrupt "Tum, Tum." It leaves you emotionally suspended, hovering two feet over the earth. You desire *terra firma*—"ta TUM!"—because the music has aroused an "appetite" that craves fulfillment. When composers provide "ta TUM!" they satisfy the very appetite they aroused.

Form functions the same way in literature. Burke says, "A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence."¹² Instead of using musical chords, literature uses a different set of formal features. The later

chapters of this book closely examine the features of six genres; here it's enough to argue that the rhythm of a poem or the plot structure of a story creates expectation in the reader. We desire the rhythm to pulse and the plot to climax.¹³ From the jiggling cadence of a limerick to the classic reversal in Greek drama, audiences expect certain things to happen and are gratified when those things occur. Sometimes the opening line is enough to point the arrows of our expectations: "Once upon a time . . ."; "A priest, a rabbi, and a minister went into a bar"; "I, being of sound mind, do hereby . . ."; "And it came to pass that a certain man went on a journey." From the opening line, you know what's coming, and literature with formal excellence will capitalize on that desire.

Form is one of the factors that determines the level of participation demanded of the listener. Riddles and parables induce thought—their brevity, use of metaphor, and laconic quality cause us to ponder. The sports page, on the other hand, with its endless statistics, multiple stories, and breezy style lends itself to scanning. Advertising jingles work almost subliminally, sticking in our minds like superglue because they hypnotically repeat simple tunes and simple words. Puritan sermons demand concentration lest they numb us by their length and complexity. Readers are sometimes unaware that form prompts their participation, but participate they do, and often without realizing it. Form's influence may, in fact, be most powerful when it is subtle.

When form prompts participation, we are more likely to accept the ideas associated with the form. Burke explains: "Yielding to the form prepares for assent to the matter identified with it. . . . And this attitude of assent may then be transferred to the matter which happens to be associated with the form."¹⁴

"For instance," Burke continues, "imagine a passage built about a set of oppositions ('we do this, but they . . . do that; we stay *here*, but *they go there*; we look *up*, but they look *down*,' etc.). Once you grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter. Formally, you will find yourself swinging along with the succession of antitheses, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is being presented in this form."¹⁵

I found this to be true for myself with that old Burger King jingle:

Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce,
Special orders don't upset us,
All we ask is that you let us
Serve it your way.

As I swung along with the regular rhythm, clever rhyme, childish tune, and staccato words, I transferred my "attitude of assent" to the proposition—Burger King is looking out for me. They want to serve me. They love me! I participated in my own persuasion, prompted in part by the form of the jingle.¹⁶

When it comes to advertising jingles, form helps shape our attitudes. When it comes to sermons, form helps shape our faith. Craddock explains:

Ministers who, week after week, frame their sermons as arguments, syllogisms armed for debate, tend to give that form to the faith perspective of regular listeners. Being a Christian is proving you are right. . . . Sermons which invariably place before the congregation the "either/or" format . . . contribute to oversimplification, inflexibility, and the notion that faith is always an urgent decision. In contrast, "both/and" sermons tend to broaden horizons and sympathies but never confront the listener with a crisp decision. . . . Regardless of the subjects being treated, a preacher can thereby nourish rigidity or openness, legalism or graciousness, inclusiveness or exclusiveness, adversarial or conciliating mentality, willingness to discuss or demand immediate answers.¹⁷

Later chapters suggest how to expand your repertoire of forms to help your congregation conceive, process, and live out their understanding of God.

Now that I've argued that the form of the biblical text is part of how God, as artist and persuader, expresses himself, and now that I've implied that preachers should pay attention to form, I want to make clear that I'm not a "form fundamentalist." I do not assert that we must slavishly and minutely copy the exact genre of the text. Besides being impossible—for no single sermon can replicate all the dynamics

of a text—it might also be ill advised, because we stand between two worlds. We communicate with a different audience than the original audience, and sermons must take into account the needs of the current listeners. The key to genre sensitive preaching is to replicate the impact of the text, not its exact techniques, although technique is the best place to start. A narrative text naturally lends itself to a narrative sermon; a poetic text structured with parallelism naturally lends itself to restatement. But no law tells us that we must use narrative or restatement. We have freedom.

Each chapter in this book contains concrete suggestions for replicating the impact of the text. As preachers, we want to say what the text says and do what the text does. We want to communicate with variety because the Great Communicator did so originally. A quotation from Lubeck, a scholar of biblical interpretation and communication, summarizes my beliefs about genre sensitive preaching:

Genres provide us with different models for seeing reality. A poetic description of life is qualitatively different from narrative or discourse (compare Exodus 14 with Exodus 15). As preachers and teachers, we only relate the whole counsel of God to others when we accurately represent *all* of these complementary modes of knowing inherent in the diverse literary forms of the Bible. Our preaching thus must reflect sensitivity and fidelity to the *kinds* of truth that may be found in the full range of biblical genres.¹⁸

This chapter has given one reason that we should preach with variety, that is, because the text uses variety. The next chapter gives a second reason—the listeners.

2



Speaking Bantu to Channel Surfers

The ratio of illiterates to literates is unchanged from a century ago, but now the illiterates can read and write.

—Alberto Moravia, Italian novelist,
cited in Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*

There is no good in arguing with the inevitable. The only argument available with an east wind is to put on your overcoat.

—James Russell Lowell,
Democracy and Other Addresses,
cited in Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*

It will take all our learning to make things plain.

—Archbishop Ussher, quoted in Larsen,
Telling the Old, Old Story

More people have been bored out of the Christian faith than have been reasoned out of it. Dull, insipid sermons not only

cause drooping eyes and nodding heads, they destroy life and hope.

—H. W. Robinson and T. W. Robinson,
It's All in How You Tell It

The only kind of learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered or self-appropriated learning—truth that has been assimilated in experience.

—Carl Rogers, quoted in Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*

The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.

—Mark Van Doren, quoted in Miller,
Experiential Storytelling

Why preach with variety? The primary reason, covered in the previous chapter, is because God, the Great Communicator, uses variety. A second reason arises from an incarnational theology of preaching, or as C. S. Lewis says, our need to speak Bantu: “It is absolutely disgraceful that we expect missionaries to the Bantus to learn Bantu but never ask whether our missionaries to the Americans or English can speak American or English.”¹ Lewis points out, “If you were sent to the Bantus you would be taught their language and traditions. You need similar teaching about the language and mental habits of your own uneducated and unbelieving fellow countrymen.”² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the finest expositors of the twentieth century in the Reformed tradition, echoes Lewis:

We are not going to fight this modern battle successfully by repeating the sermons of the Puritans verbatim, or adopting their classifications and sub-divisions, and their manner of preaching. That would be futile. We must learn to hold on to the old principles but we must apply them, and use them, in a manner that is up-to-date. . . . The moment we become slaves to any system—I do not care how good it was in its age and generation—we are already defeated, because we have missed the whole principle of adaptability.³

What does the principle of adaptability mean for us? It means we must learn to speak Bantu. The following five factors influence how contemporary listeners listen, and so should influence how contemporary speakers speak.

Visual

Electronic communication media have shifted what Walter Ong calls the “sensorium,” the complex of senses used to perceive the world.⁴ In the ancient, pretypographic world, the human mind was conditioned to learn through the ear, particularly through the sound of one person speaking to another. After Gutenberg, the sensorium shifted to sight, with words being conceived of as abstract marks on a page (like the ones you are reading now), and no longer as aural encounters with persons. Today the sensorium remains strongly visual, but now pictures have trumped abstract marks. The year 1985 was the first year when more videos were checked out of public libraries than books.⁵ In 2006, 80 percent of the cell phones sold in the U.S. included a camera.⁶ Consider these statistics about the use of TV in the average U.S. home:

- The television is on for 7 hours and 40 minutes each day.
- Individuals watch more than 4 hours of TV a day.
- Fifty-six percent of children ages 8–16 have a TV in their bedrooms.
- Thirty-seven percent of children age 6 and under have a TV in their bedrooms.
- The average child spends 900 hours a year in school.
- The average child spends 1,023 hours a year watching TV.⁷

The place where the printed word has mostly become a mere annex to the image is probably in the advertising industry. Here’s how advertising used to be done in the days of typography: Paul Revere wrote in the *Boston Gazette*, “Whereas many persons are so unfortunate as to lose their Foreteeth by Accident, and otherways, to their great Detriment, not only in Looks, but Speaking both in Public and Private:—This is to inform all such, that they may have them re-placed with false Ones, that look as well as the Natural, and Answers the

End of Speaking to all Intents, by PAUL REVERE, Goldsmith, near the Head of Dr. Clarke's Wharf, Boston."⁸

Notice the literate style of the communication—long sentences, complex grammar, straightforward reasoning. It strikes us as quaint, or perhaps confusing or boring. What would the same content look like in the hands of today's advertisers? Images would dominate, and words would simply caption the images. If, for example, the ad were created for a magazine, a large picture of pearly white teeth might fill the page. Beneath the picture the caption might read, "Got teeth? If you're missing any, come see Paul Revere." If the ad were created for television, it might show a young man playing basketball. An errant pass might strike him in the mouth. A jump cut might take us to the emergency room to see the basketball player being wheeled in. Then another jump cut might show him walking out of the hospital with a girl on his arm, teeth gleaming. Then the voiceover would state, "Need teeth? Come see Paul Revere."

This visual form of communication seems more immediate and intense than the print ad from the 1700s. It maximizes impact and minimizes logic. Moving images capture involuntary attention, whereas typographic communication demands voluntary attention. Thus, in the electronic age when children see hundreds of thousands of commercials on television alone,⁹ repeated exposure to visual communication conditions how we process information. Today, most people are less skillful than Paul Revere's audience was in receiving communication transmitted through abstract marks on a page. Most people prefer to receive communication transmitted through pictures. McDonald's knows this. Their "menu" is a series of pictures.

One response the church can make to media saturation is to throw up our hands in despair, lament that preaching can never compete with television, and resign ourselves to boring sermons. Another response is to raise the drawbridge, hunker down for siege, fling firebrands and millstones over the fortress walls, and pray that the pagan hordes will not break in. People who choose this option sometimes sneer at the shorter attention spans of the electronic world, but their observation needs to be qualified. People today are quite capable of sustained attention—observe a crowd at a movie—but they no longer easily give their attention to, as Hamlet would say, "words, words, words." The

siege option can be tempting because, as people of the Book, we rightly value literacy; but to criticize listeners for not being literate and to offer the truth of God's Word only through typographically biased forms (unlike the genres discussed in this book) is like a missionary to the Bantus who refuses to speak Bantu. A researcher in communicating with oral cultures, Grant Lovejoy argues, insisting that people leave their image-oriented minds outside the church door creates an unbiblical stumbling block.¹⁰ In New Testament times most people were illiterate, yet the gospel spread like prairie fire.

Another response to today's visual sensorium is to preach with variety like the Great Communicator. The Bible itself guides us in creating sermon forms suited to today's listeners. We will never lose our love of words, so crucial to communication and to Christianity. For as Andy Crouch says, "The more powerful the image, whether tragic or triumphant, the more we need words to make sense of it."¹¹ But when ministering to Bantus we need to augment the verbal with a strong visual component.

Speed

The advent of electronic communication, which began in 1840 with Morse and the telegraph, has obliterated time and space in communication. We now communicate around the globe at the speed of light. An unfortunate side effect of the electronic revolution is information overload, for we can now transmit so much information so quickly, as well as store that information, that no one can absorb even 1 percent of what is available. Information (but not necessarily understanding) is fed to us as factoids. For example, the average sound bite of presidential candidates on network news in 2004 was less than eight seconds. The HCSB Light Speed Bible promises to, "in an exhilarating sweep of 24 hours, expose your mind and heart to every word and teaching of the Old and New Testaments." If the Light Speed Bible is too slow for you, try the 100-Minute Bible, a sixty-four-page paperback that the publisher claims is the principal "stories of the life and ministry of its central character, Jesus Christ."¹²

How shall we communicate to this hasty generation, this society overfed with information but undernourished with understanding?

One response, but not the only one, is by employing variety, for it helps maintain and focus attention, so precious in our fragmented world. Variety also helps us communicate holistically, touching the heart as well as the mind, so that biblical truth is perceived as more than factoids. When preaching with variety, we are likely to slow the rapid flow of information typical of expository sermons, yet that slowing will not bore the nanosecond generation, for the sermon shifts perspective often.

Participation and Experience

Information overload has created a gulf between most of the knowledge we receive and most of our daily activities. Henry David Thoreau foresaw this even in the days of telegraphy: “We are in a great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. . . . We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.”¹³

One result of the bifurcation of information and praxis is that people today crave experiential knowledge. They want “real life” to be the seedbed of knowledge. Reading facts from books, or even hearing facts spouted on the evening news, seems increasingly distant and irrelevant because it is mediated and secondhand. Modern listeners have been socialized to participate in their own education and entertainment even with one-way media like radio and television.¹⁴ Radio uses call-in shows, and television programs like Monday Night Football and so-called reality TV shows increasingly invite viewer participation in live polls. Part of the reason television has been forced to become more participatory is because video games have created the expectation that we should be able to manipulate the screen and contribute to our own entertainment. The video game industry is so large that it frequently beats the earnings of TV and movies—and, by the way, the average age of gamers in 2006 was thirty, with 17 percent older than fifty, so don’t think that kids are the only ones who speak Bantu today.¹⁵

The news industry, too, feels the need to shift toward participation. Robert Murdoch, founder and chair of News Corporation, which includes Fox News, commented in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors,

What is happening right now before us is, in short, a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don’t want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don’t want to rely on a godlike figure from above to tell them what’s important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don’t want news presented as gospel. Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it. They want to question, to probe, to offer a different angle.¹⁶

Another venue, the museum, is also becoming highly participatory. For decades, children’s museums have used interactive learning, but that is now becoming the norm for adult museums as well. The old exhibits with a display and a plaque are fading. Now the norm is more like the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. When you enter the building, you are given some documents—an ID card, background, and story of an actual holocaust victim. As you progress through the permanent exhibits, which are arranged chronologically, you refer to your documents to see what was happening to the victim. The goal is to help you identify with the victim for a few hours, vicariously experiencing the somber events. The impact is enormous, much greater than would be felt from a merely analytical, detached point of view.

How, though, do we speak Bantu to modern Westerners? In the following chapters you’ll get some ideas for using variety to heighten participation. Preachers, remember, have freedom to do so, and as homiletician David Buttrick states, “Homiletical form is usually experimental, because preachers are developing rhetoric to match the shape of a new, forming human consciousness.”¹⁷

Participatory education has actually been around for thousands of years. It is part of the genius behind the Jewish seder service as well as Christian rites such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and anointing

with oil. Even in 1884, well before the winds of the electronic revolution reached gale force, John Milton Gregory wrote “Law Two” in *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, which states that “the Learner must attend with interest to the material to be learned”:¹⁸

One may as well talk to the deaf or to the dead as to attempt to teach a child who is wholly inattentive. . . . Knowledge cannot be passed like a material substance from one mind to another, for thoughts are not objects which may be held and handled. Ideas can be communicated only by inducing in the receiving mind processes corresponding to those by which these ideas were first conceived. Ideas must be rethought, experience must be re-experienced. It is obvious, therefore, that something more is required than a mere presentation; the pupil must think.¹⁹

Preaching with variety can help us help others to think. This kind of preaching does not dumb down the truth; it offers it in accordance with the best principles of audience analysis and adaptation.

Authority

Modern listeners tend to locate authority in personal experience. They are eager to listen to those who have “been there,” and they are skeptical of those who wield authority that comes only from position or “book learning.” Furthermore, they tend to believe that truth for a community is best discerned in community. Like the other factors above, authority in experience has strengths and weaknesses. A strength is that the faith is conceived of in terms of lifestyle and the Lord’s active working in our lives. A weakness is that authority becomes overly subjective. The church must be taught that God grants spiritual authority to elders and leaders. Furthermore, the church must maintain the legitimacy of reason, not just intuition, as a means of knowing God.

But the question this book addresses is how we can teach such things. Preaching with variety offers some promise. Many of the homiletical suggestions in the following chapters show how to employ

communal and experiential forms of communication like dialogue, self-disclosure, induction, and working in concert with the entire service. For the Bantus, these forms tend to soften the brassy trumpet of authority even while effectively teaching the Word.

Types of Learners and Thinkers

One hundred listeners will translate a single sermon into one hundred more or less correlated messages. The dynamics that cause this phenomenon are enormously complex, but the theories of learning styles from the fields of education and psychology help us grasp some of those dynamics.²⁰ This body of literature includes the Myers-Briggs Personality Types (introvert/extrovert, sensor/intuitive, thinker/feeler, judger/perceiver),²¹ Ned Hermann’s Brain Dominance model (right-brain, left-brain),²² Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, etc.),²³ and Deborah Tannen’s theory of gender and communication (male and female sociolinguistics).²⁴ The evidence given to support these theories seems conclusive—people use different senses, abilities, and perspectives when they listen to sermons. Preaching with variety helps us connect with the sampler of listeners. For many of these listeners, Pascal’s famous maxim holds true—“The heart has its reasons which reason does not know,”²⁵—as does Macneile Dixon’s statement, “The human mind is not . . . a debating hall, but a picture gallery.”²⁶ Kent Edwards says simply that “those preachers who want the largest number of people to learn from their sermons should utilize what Gardner refers to as ‘multiple entry points.’”²⁷

Why preach with variety? Not because we’re trying to exalt self, but because we want to exalt God; not because we call the shots, but because God sets the pattern as the Great Communicator; not because we want to manipulate listeners, but because they speak Bantu. Let’s get on with it!