

Preaching with Variety: Part 2 – Poetry and Discourse

The Bible God has given us is overflowing with variety. It was written by over forty authors, in three languages, on three continents, over a couple of thousand years, and yet is united by the Spirit into a single masterful work that points us to Christ. The Bible is anything but dull. In this session we will consider how biblical poetry and biblical discourse work. How should we approach the Psalms and the Prophets, as well as Jesus' direct teaching and the Epistles? How can we not only say what the Bible says, but also seek to do what the Bible does?

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I. Poetry: When Only a Song Will Communicate

A. The location of biblical poetry:

Psalms & Wisdom (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs)

B. Studying Poetry

B.1) Be aware of main poetic forms (lament, praise and thanksgiving), but don't try to force a poem to fit a framework.

B.2) Take note of any historical indicators, but don't try to force a poem to fit in a historical situation that is only guesswork.

B.3) Note especially how Hebrew poetry is built using parallelism (typically two lines where the second completes the first). Be sure to read poetry in light of this (rather than studying only half a parallelism, or contrasting two elements that are actually reinforcing the same thought).

B.4) Look at the structure of the poem, but don't dissect it so that all emotion is drained away.

B.5) Notice the mood of the author and the images used to move the reader.

C. Preaching Poetry

C.1) Typically follow the structure of the poem unless you have good reason to change the order, but preach the poem holistically (rather than making it act like an epistle).

C.2) Take full advantage of the imagery and emotion of the poem to help the listener engage with their hearts as well as their heads.

C.3) Don't rush – poetry is designed for pondering, not a clipped logical presentation.

D. Getting Practical

D.1) The basic building block of Hebrew poetry: the parallelism

Eg. Proverbs 29:18

Where there is no vision, the people perish,
(But happy is he who keeps the Law.)

D.2) Structure and imagery in poetry

Psalm 100 (ESV)

A PSALM FOR GIVING THANKS.

1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

2 Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

3 Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,

and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him; bless his name!

5 For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.

II. Discourse: A Narrative Snapshot

A. The functions of direct communication

A.1) The author's intended effect

A.2) Tone, mood and other indicators

B. The context of direct communication

B.1) Historical context

B.2) Written context

C. Interpreting direct communication

C.1) Considering context (written & historical)

C.2) Considering content (details & strategy)

a) Structural study

Colossians 1:3–14 (ESV)

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, **4** since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, **5** because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, **6** which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, **7** just as you learned it from Epaphras our

beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf **8** and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, **10** so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. **11** May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, **12** giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. **13** He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

b) Word study

i) Consider the underlying Hebrew or Greek term (use concordance or Bible software to get to it)

ii) Study every use of that term within the author's books, or book, or section

iii) Analyse how the author uses the term, then check your understanding with a Bible dictionary

C.3) Considering intent (stated & implied)

C.4) Determining idea (“saying something about something”)

D. Preaching direct communication

D.1) The “simplest form of preaching” (but don’t assume that application is always simple and direct)

D.2) Frame the narrative for “story effect”

Suggested Readings:

Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Kregel, 2007)

Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching* (B&H, 2009)

J.P.Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (WJK, 2001)

Ron Frost, *Discover the Power of the Bible* (Harvest House, 2000)

Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change* (Authentic, 2005)

www.biblicalpreaching.net (daily posts from Peter Mead relating to sermon preparation, delivery and the life of the preacher.)

Supplement I: Feel the Force: Poetry

When we preach poetry, do our listeners really feel the force of it? Poetry is found in the Psalms and wisdom literature, of course, but also in the historical books and the prophets too. All too easily we can preach to the head, but not move the listeners with the force of the text.

A couple of thoughts on this:

1. Word images may not carry instant force, so we should build it. For example, when the Psalms speak of the heavens, the stars, the sun and moon, etc., there is a big difference between most listeners today and the original hearers of the text. They lived under the stars. Once the sun went down the rhythm of life changed and stargazing was as normal as TV gazing is for some today. So a brief reference to how amazing it is to look at the stars and feel so small (as in Psalm 8) simply will not move contemporary listeners like the original reference would have done. Today we have to build an awareness of our smallness (thankfully we have NASA and the Hubble telescope to help generate a sense of smallness!)

2. The structure of a poem, the shift in content, may not be apparent to our listeners, so we should clarify and demonstrate it. If the poem was read carefully straight through, the discerning reader would probably pick up on the transition that occurs. The problem with preaching though is that the extra words may obscure the transitions instead of clarifying them. There is a major transition at the mid-point of Psalm 73. Yet if the preacher is droning in their voice, or simply moving methodically through a series of points, that dramatic transition may easily be missed.

3. Emotive language can so easily be made informational. As I've probably written elsewhere on this site, it is so easy to dissect a frog to learn how it jumps, but in doing so we stop it doing so. A dissected poem is not enough for effective preaching.

People listening need to feel the force of poetry so that it can mark their lives deeply, as God intends.

<http://biblicalpreaching.net/2010/02/17/feel-the-force-poetry/>

Supplement II: Narrative as Super-Genre

While we tend to think in terms of seven biblical genres, I find it helpful to recognize three types of literature – narrative, poetry and discourse. These types occur proportionately in that order. Narrative is the most common, discourse the least.

In simplistic terms narrative consists of people in plots, poetry consists of parallelism and imagery, and discourse consists of direct speech or correspondence.

Here is a thought to consider: maybe narrative should be considered a super-genre.

That is to say, the core features of narrative are not completely absent from the other types of literature. Let's say the core features include the development and resolution of tension in the situation of characters. There are people with a problem in a plot.

What do we have with poetry? Often we have a person reacting to life in the form of poetic writing. If they are reacting to the threat of enemies, then we might find a psalm of lament. If they have been delivered and are looking back on the experience, then we might have a psalm of praise and thanksgiving. Poems often function as a snapshot into the response of an individual to the narrative of life lived in a fallen world, in response to our good God. Most poems are not narrational or complete in terms of plot line. But often poems are glimpses into the narrational nature of life's experience.

What do we have with discourse? Often we have a person addressing others who are facing the realities of life. In the midst of a problem we might find the text offers guidance or encouragement. In the aftermath of a problem we might find gratitude and thanksgiving. Since no individual or church is ever beyond problems in this life, typically we will find the discourse to be engaging the realities of these tensions in some form. Discourse rarely reflects a complete plot (except in review), but it does give a snapshot into an ongoing narrative. Discourse offers a glimpse into the narrational nature of life for a person, nation or church.

We could go through the genres and see the narrational features of prophecy, apocalyptic, wisdom writings, etc. Space does not permit, this post needs a conclusion:

So what? Well, as preachers, this is important to recognize. This means that we can bring some of the skills needed for the effective preaching of story over to the other two types of biblical literature. We don't preach poetry or discourse as pure narrative. But we miss an opportunity if we preach either as if there is nothing narrational going on.

Our listeners are also mid-story in the narrative of life. They also struggle with the incomplete experience of tensions as yet unresolved. Perhaps a narrational engagement with the emotion of poetry, or the wisdom of discourse, might prove invaluable.

Our listeners are living life in narrative. There's a reason that story engages listeners. Let's not miss opportunities to engage present story with biblical story, whether that be a full-blown narrative, or the snapshot offered in poetry or discourse.

This is why I consider narrative to be a "super-genre."

<http://biblicalpreaching.net/2012/02/24/narrative-as-super-genre/>