
OCTOBER 1989

Religion and the American University
Eric Daeuber and Paul Shore..... 241

Puritan Homiletics: A Caveat
William G. Houser..... 255

Homiletical Studies..... 271

Book Reviews..... 309



Puritan Homiletics: A Caveat

William G. Houser

The thinking of our modern American civilization is greatly and swiftly affected by the mass-media—radio, television, and the newspapers. In the early years of our country's Puritan history, this situation was not possible. However, a means was available that took advantage of the historical-religious context of the colonies and became a major literary vehicle. The sermon arose as a significant and influential method of communication within the cities, and connected the metropolis to the rural areas by the frontier pulpit.

The pulpiteers from England brought a hybrid model of homiletics to America to delineate their religious system of beliefs. These Puritan sermons borrowed from the "stylistic methods of contemporary literary fashion"¹ inherited from the English sixteenth century, but the Elizabethan extravagances were severely modified by the Puritan plain style of speech. Some Anglican preachers sought a "metaphysical" style which was characterized by both its verbal voluptuousness and its abstruseness. The Puritan plain style sermon was a reaction to this homiletical model, for the pastor made certain "that he may be understood by the lowest capacities"² by avoiding the abstract and presenting the biblical content in simplicity and relevance. The homiletician utilized figurative language, but was aware of its potential to complicate rather than to clarify the interpretation of Scripture. As a result, the sermons were pertinent theological presentations undergirded by an eloquence of rich expressiveness.

The art of sermonizing for the Puritans had its roots in the three rules of Roman oratory of the classical age—*placere*, *docere*, and *movere*—to please, in the sense of gripping the hearers' minds and keeping interest alert; to teach and instruct, as distinct from mere exhortation and uplift and the recital of pious platitudes; to move the heart and sting the will into action. New England preachers were acquainted with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*³ and depended upon its two forms of proof essential to argumentation—the syllogism and enthymeme. Regarding the passions, the Puritans, like Aristotle, placed the affections in a secondary position as a means to support reasoning: "The power of emotions to influence should be

released only after the listener has been persuaded through rational means.”⁴

Puritan preaching flourished over the years, but “by the late 1660’s and early 1670’s the discontent with the ministers had grown. . .”⁵ Sociological changes caused some restlessness among the congregations, but “the sermons themselves offer the best evidence that all was not rapt attention to and reverent acceptance of the rendering of the Bible being presented by the ministers.”⁶ Several factors were blamed for the decline of the Sunday sermon. Chief among them were the protracted length of the sermon, the reading of the manuscripts, and the emotionless mechanical delivery. Each contributed heavily to the collapse of the Puritan pulpit but, if there was a *causa causans*, it had to be the monotonous method of sermon outlining which was not to be challenged or changed.

The Pilgrims and Puritans brought a sermon configuration from England which, for the most part, was authored by William Perkins, the renowned Cambridge preacher and theologian:

His works were translated into many languages and circulated in all Reformed communities; he was one of the outstanding pulpit orators of the day, and the seventeenth century, Catholic as well as Protestant, ranked him with Calvin.⁷

The pragmatic and time-honored outline was composed of four parts: text, doctrine, reasons, and uses (applications). The sermon began with the reading of the text, and brief comments were made by the “opening of the words and sentences of the Scripture, that one entire and natural sense may appear.”⁸ The second part, “doctrine,” was “to collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the natural sense”⁹ of the Bible verse or verses. The third part, “reasons,” was “to demonstrate the truth of the doctrine, thereby guiding the listener to a rational conviction.”¹⁰ Finally, the “uses” or “applications” were to apply “the doctrines rightly collected to the life and manners of men.”¹¹ Perry Miller, Distinguished Powell M. Capot Professor of American Literature at Harvard, describes the sermon format: “The Puritan work is mechanically and rigidly divided into sections and subheads, and appears on the printed page more like a lawyer’s brief than a work of art.”¹²

The unbending rules of the Puritan sermon configuration were drilled into the theological students as the only legitimate means for the sermonic pattern. This specialized compartmental mode was unswervingly followed in every Sunday sermon and it also appeared in every preaching occasion. No other method was acceptable but text, doctrine, reasons, and uses. It was slavishly respected as infallible by all Puritan pulpiteers, and it became the homiletical badge of their orthodoxy. Perry Miller aptly describes the veneration of this design:

For Puritans characteristically did not recognize that any of their precepts were derived from other men, but ascribed all of them, including. . .preaching in doctrine, reasons, and uses, to the universal and eternal wisdom of God.¹³

During the early 1700's (before the Great Awakening) the congregational response to the Puritan sermon was so disapproving that it was a common sight in Puritan churches to see the usher standing in the back with a large pole. A feather was attached to one end and a hard knob to the other. The feather was for tickling and keeping the children awake, and the knob was for tapping the heads and arousing the sleeping adults. The Sunday morning sermon had become ineffective to the "visible saints," who nestled under a blanket of apathy, unresponsive to the pulpit's anachronistic whine: text, doctrine, reasons, uses. But the New England laity was soon to be revived from its long spiritual sleep by a major preaching revolution which occurred during the First Great Awakening of 1730-1760.

The Great Awakening was that historical event whose theological strife rocked the colonies for thirty years. During that time it is estimated that there were "40,000 converts. . .at a time when there were only 250,000 inhabitants in the entire region."¹⁴ The four leading ministers of the Awakening were George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Charles Chauncy, and Jonathan Edwards. More than any other figure, it was George Whitefield, an Anglican minister from England, who was responsible for the spiritual awakening in New England. He barnstormed and disseminated the word on both sides of the Atlantic: the American Colonies, England, Wales, Scotland,

Ireland, and Holland. Whitefield preached “something like a thousand times a year for some thirty years. . . he was regularly heard by congregations of 10,000 and sometimes 20,000 and 30,000.”¹⁵ Relatively modest figures concur that he “preached eighteen thousand times to more than one hundred million persons”¹⁶ in his lifetime.

There were several factors which brought such amazing results. Chief among these were Whitefield’s magnificent voice, an extemporaneous delivery, the emphasis upon experimental religion, and his unique sermon configurations. Eugene White, in *Puritan Rhetoric*, rightly asserts: “the preaching of George Whitefield in the Great Awakening introduced a new sermonology.”¹⁷ Joseph Tracy, the acknowledged authority on the Great Awakening, comments on Whitefield’s break from the past sermon forms:

Moved in his utmost soul by the sight of his fellow-men ready to perish and yet ignorant of their danger, he could not better himself with the rules by which ordinary men were taught to construct dull sermons; he must pour forth the desires of his heart and the convictions of his mind. And he did pour them forth, in a style natural and clear.¹⁸

Whitefield dared to break the “tradition of the elders” by refusing to be shackled to the institutional mind-set of the one and only acceptable method for sermon outlining: text, doctrine, reasons, and uses. He employed several non-traditional sermon constructions.

George Whitefield was not an iconoclast who sought to upset the historical Puritan homiletical rules, but he refused to conform to their homiletic legislation because his various styles of sermon building best suited his temperament, his background, and his individual uniqueness. Is not this lesson from our nation’s early religious history a caveat to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod?

The immigrant Lutheran clergymen from Saxony (Germany) received their rhetorical and homiletical training from their classical German university education and from the traditions of the Lutheran fathers. Like the Pilgrims and Puritans in their single-mindedness, they carried only one acceptable sermon configuration—the textual—across the ocean to Perry County (1839). The textual method is con-

structured in three diverse but essentially similar configurations: the textual (narrow sense) analytic (direct) sermon; the textual (narrow sense) synthetic (indirect) sermon; and the textual (wider sense) synthetic (indirect) or subject sermon.

Much confusion exists in homiletic terminology attributable to the homileticsians using similar names while allowing different meanings for the same expressions. We will endeavor to establish a common understanding of homiletic definitions regarding sermon configurations. (1) In the textual (narrow sense) analytic (direct) sermon “textual” indicates that a portion of Scripture is the basis for the sermon; “analytic” means that one finds the central thought of the verse or verses and separates the text into its component parts, with the divisions and subdivisions giving the solution to the theme (proposition). It is called the “direct” method because it arranges the word as it is directly expressed and the exposition is natural as it proceeds in the order of the logical division of the text. (2) The textual (narrow sense) synthetic (indirect) sermon does not seek the central (outstanding) thought of the text as the analytic sermon, but ascertains an inferred or implied topic (indirect). Therefore, unlike the analytic sermon, the exposition does not follow the natural order of the logical division of the text but the logical division of the topic. It synthesizes the text into a coherent whole, divisions and subdivisions giving the solution to the theme. To better differentiate between the two configurations compare these two examples:

Textual (Narrow Sense) Analytic (Direct) Sermon

Matthew 28:18-20

What Great Encouragement Does the Lord Give His Church for Its Work Here upon Earth?

1. He gives us His commission to Christianize all nations, v. 19.
2. He gives us the promise of His power and His presence, vv. 18, 20.¹⁹

Textual (Narrow Sense) Synthetic (Indirect) Sermon

Matthew 28:18-20

What May Be the Cause Why Our Church-Work at Home and Abroad Does Not Show Greater Results?

1. It may be that we are not doing to the full extent of our ability what the Lord asks us to do (Christianize all nations), v. 19.
2. It may be that we are not, as we ought to do, using the means which He has given us, vv. 19, 20. (We perhaps depend too much on other means of increasing our membership rather than upon the Word alone).
3. It may be that we are failing to put full confidence in the Lord's promise of His power and presence, vv. 18, 20. (Let us not lose faith in the power of the Gospel and in the Lord's present help.)²⁰

(3) In the textual (wider sense) synthetic (indirect) or subject sermon the topic is deduced from a text (indirect) or from the preacher's thoughts. The sermon is written independently of the text (though it may included) and constructed from other Bible verses, Bible materials, theology, hymns, religious literature, and the like. The exposition is not naturally drawn from the logical division of the text, as in the textual (narrow sense) analytic (direct) sermon; but is taken in the order of the logical division of the topic, as in the textual (narrow sense) synthetic (indirect) sermon. The subject sermon like the other two textual methods is constructed with the parts (divisions and subdivisions) giving the solution to the theme. An example provided by Dr. C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887) is a subject sermon found in an early homiletic textbook of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis:

*Subject Sermon:**Textual (Wider Sense) Synthetic (Indirect)***Proposition: Shall a Man Marry?**

1. The answer in Eden (Genesis 2:20-25).
2. The answer in Cana (John 2:1-11).

3. The answer of the apostles (1 Corinthians 9:5).
4. The answer of Rome (1 Timothy 4:1-3).
5. The answer of the true confessions (confessional writings).²¹

Henceforth, to avoid confusion concerning the various configurations, references will only be made to two configurations as both are generally recognized by most homileticians: the "textual" and the "topical." The "textual" category includes the textual (narrow sense) analytic (direct) and the textual (narrow sense) synthetic (indirect). The term "topical" designates the subject sermon: textual (wider sense) synthetic(indirect).

Although the textual and topical configurations were brought to America by the Saxon Lutheran pastors, the one responsible for the entrenchment of the three configurations was Dr. C. F. W. Walther. Walther's homiletic impact was imparted through a triad of eminent positions in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He was its first president (1854), a founder and first president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (1854), and one of its earliest theological professors (1850). He also explicated his precepts as editor of *Der Lutheraner* (1844), our first religious paper, and *Lehre und Wehre* (1855), a professional theological journal. Throughout his career Walther promulgated the textual and the topical methods as the only acceptable configurations for the exposition of Scripture. The topical format became very cherished among the pastors and laity in Synod. Walther usually delivered his topical sermons for congregational events or festive occasions, and it was his habit to deliver a topical sermon every Christmas Day. However, there were some objections to Walther's conceptualizing of the topical sermon; and over the years sporadic oral debates and "paper-wars" erupted. The advocates of the textual sermon upheld its superiority against the "less-than-acceptable" topical form. The arguments centered upon the construction of the topical sermon from several texts, plus additional biblical materials; whereas the textual approach insisted upon the exposition of only one text.

Dr. Theodore Graebner (1876-1950) joined the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1913 and, with Walther as

his exemplar, retained the traditional policy of teaching both the textual and the topical methods. His configurations are featured in detail in a homiletic book published in 1918: *Inductive Homiletics—A Manual for Classroom and Preacher's Desk*.²² However, later on the textual format gained a supremacy in the seminary lecture halls and official publications of the Missouri Synod. Undoubtedly, the man most responsible was Dr. John H. C. Fritz (1874-1953), who came to the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1920 and published *The Preacher's Manual* in 1941. It contains his absolutism concerning sermon designs:

It takes a long time to be emancipated from the tyranny of the topical, or theme, sermon, which has dominated over our pulpits.²³

Eliminating, as we must, the "topical method," which does not preach the text and is not conducive to promote Biblical preaching, we have in the final analysis, two sermon methods, the "textual" and the "inferential."²⁴

Fritz's militant stand cast a dominant and intimidating image over the synod's seminaries and pulpits. The topical advocates, however, did not succumb and were resuscitated by the efforts of Dr. Richard Caemmerer (1904-1984), who was called to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1940. He reintroduced and reinforced the topical sermon. Caemmerer comments on the still unsettled homiletic conflict:

The alternative to textual preaching is usually termed topical.²⁵

Initial training and denominational customs as well as later experience and habit help to make preachers quite partisan on the subject of "textual" versus "topical." Their arguments will often employ inferior samples of the one sort pitted against superior products of the other. Actually the two methods have much to learn from each other, and the wise preacher will keep his skills fresh in both directions. . .²⁶

Dr. Gerhard Aho (1923-1987), professor of homiletics at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, and Fort Wayne, Indiana, supported the historical textual method. In his homiletical manual, *The Lively Skeleton*, he is skeptical

of the topical method but, nevertheless, does give his approval: "It would be a mistake to think, however, that topical sermons cannot be developed into worthwhile sermons."²⁷ Additional suggestions for constructing sermons come from Francis Rossow (born 1925), professor of homiletics at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In his *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*²⁸ he offers many different creative approaches including the extended analogy, the fairy story, the fable, the legend, the dialogue, role-playing, and the like. Though extremely innovative, none of his recommendations are bizarre, and Professor Rossow is to be credited for his novel ideas which assist pastors caught in a monotonous and mechanical "grinding out" of sermons. His contents, with but a few exceptions, are placed into the traditional textual and topical configurations. Rossow emphatically states: "these suggestions are intended to be supplementary rather than substitutionary, to build rather than replace what you already learn from courses—writing and homiletics."²⁹ He also repeatedly counsels that these forms should be used only "sparingly" and "occasionally."

This brief scan of the history of the sermon configurations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod confirms that our pulpiteers have been officially trained in the historical textual configurations, but have conflicting opinions concerning the topical method. It is a rare occurrence when a denomination holds to the same method of sermon outlining throughout its history. The Puritans almost succeeded, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is still on track after a hundred and fifty years. (See the available homiletical materials in *The Concordia Theological Quarterly*,³⁰ *The Concordia Journal*,³¹ *The Concordia Pulpit*,³² and *The Lectionary Preaching Resources*.)³³

Why is Walther's rigid homiletical mandate concerning the textual sermon and the still debated topical sermon so exclusively accepted, in like fashion as the Puritans espoused Perkins' text, doctrine, reasons, and uses? Is it because of Walther's distinguished influence and strategic leadership in every aspect of the synod: its founding, its presidency, its educational institutions, its doctrines, its publications, its seminaries, and its homiletics? To find the complete answer one must go to Walther's sermons. Walther's homiletic

greatness is readily perceived. He was an exceptional preacher by any homiletic standard. Clearly, the illuminating impact of his sermons on the mind and emotions is created by his uncompromising declaration of God's Word, cradled in eloquence and coupled to the textual and topical methods of preaching. Walther was the preacher *par excellence* and his students willingly accepted not only his lectures on confessional truths, but also his teachings on persuasive rhetoric and his instructions on sermon configuration. However, after a thorough study of his many sermons, my judgment is that his homiletic expertise does not result from placing his content within the textual (analytic and synthetic) and topical (synthetic) configurations, with the parts, divisions, and subdivisions giving the solution to the theme. Rather, Walther's impressive gift of preaching is the result of his eloquent articulating of God's Word—his ingenious communicating of Scripture by means of his diction, syntax, and masterful usage of tropes. I further propose that he could have placed his contents into other suitable forms, but that his genius was in placing the content into the textual (analytic and synthetic) and topical (synthetic) configurations, which were the most natural for his logical mind.

Some time ago A. R. Broemel (1815-1885) wrote an illuminating essay called "Walther the Preacher." He discusses the content, form, and rhetoric of Walther's sermons. Regarding the content he states:

What he preaches is nothing but Lutheran orthodoxy. He never adds to it nor subtracts from it. He stands exactly where old Lutheran preachers and theologians stand. . .³⁴

Next, Broemel assesses Walther's form:

From the Lutheran fathers, Walther has taken on form, organization, and clear outlining. . . In Walther the form is everywhere preserved in the most correct way. Every detail is easily distinguished. Everything is in its place. Everything is divided and organized from beginning to end. From the form one sees how Walther works on his sermon, how he thinks in an orderly way to present everything neatly. The full content rests in the form of the sermon as in a safe container. He fills the form to the brim, but the firm container holds everything together.³⁵

Broemel compliments the sublimity of Walther's rhetoric:

Walther moves freely within the form. He prays fervently. He brings in the sweetest verses and sayings. He knows how to speak powerfully from heart to heart. He knows from rich experience to put the main subject, the Gospel, the comfort of the forgiveness of sins, right into the center, the heart. One listens from beginning to end with greatest joy. . . [There is a] fervency that permeates Walther's sermons. . . Walther's language is lively. . . [A] poetic vein is clear in Walther. . . He can pick on the seemingly most insignificant words and from them reveal the greatest riches of the faith.³⁶

Having assessed the content, form, and rhetoric, Broemel makes this assertion:

The penetrating effect of Walther's preaching is due not to the form but to the content. . . His confession is free and joyful. He confesses his faith as a bird sings her song. He rejoices as one of the redeemed.³⁷

It is most reassuring to discover that a contemporary of Walther undergirds my hypothesis that Walther's homiletic expertise is due not to his form, but primarily to his content—the eloquent articulation of the word. But Broemel clearly points out how Walther's content is best served by placing it inside a “container” most natural to his analytic mind. It is, I think, appropriate to draw two insights from this premise. (1) Each homiletic student and pastor must develop his rhetorical skills—syntax, diction, and tropes—to convey the truth. (2) Likewise, each must find that form (container, configuration) which is most natural to his way of thinking. I hope that our seminaries have carried out the duty of communicating our confessional beliefs through the development of rhetorical skills. It is my conviction, however, that we have neglected the second point by making a hard and fast rule that Walther's archetypal textual and topical configurations must be imitated by every preacher.

To be sure, there are those who are comfortable with the textual and topical forms, by which they produce relevant sermons. I should surmise that these individuals are much like Walther, coming from Germanic stock or possessing similar natural talents or having a classical rhetorical education. But

what of the many others of diverse nationalities and divergent abilities who come from varying social backgrounds? As a homiletic professor, I empathize with the many students whom I observe struggling to compose sermons in the exactness of Walther's forms. It is frustrating for them to be taught to become a clone of a past great homiletician when we are driven by our own unique styles which were received from our heredity, environment, and education. I find it even more unacceptable to see them taught that there is only one proper method to communicate scriptural theology, when there are several "tried" and "tested" configurations which are worthy and advantageous to each individual's distinctiveness.

It goes without saying that every sermon must possess four characteristics: (1.) It must be scriptural. It does not matter if the preacher uses a verse or two, or a chapter, or even an entire book of the Bible, as long as the text is from the Bible. (2.) It must properly divide the Law from the Gospel. The Law points out the eternally damning consequences of sin, while the Gospel proclaims Christ's sacrifice upon the cross and justification through faith. (3.) It must give a proper interpretation (exegesis) of the text which includes the teaching of pure doctrine, "refuting false doctrine, correcting an ungodly life, and encouraging a godly life."³⁸ (4.) The sermon must be relevant and not expounded in abstract and confusing terminology. Though we strive to embody properly these four mandatory precepts in our sermons, are we obliged to continue in a dogmatism that insists that these characteristics occur only in the textual and topical configurations?

I have often wondered about the wisdom of training every theological student solely in the textual and topical molds, particularly when remembering the disastrous Puritan experience, which cast a pall over the New England congregations until the arrival of Whitefield and the Great Awakening. In thirty-nine years in the ministry (twenty-four as a parish pastor, fifteen as a seminary professor) I have had the opportunity to attend Sunday morning worship services in almost every district of the synod. Regarding sermon configurations, my notes reveal that each preacher can be placed into one of five classifications: (1.) Many follow the textual and topical patterns according to the prescribed traditional rules (purebred). (2.) Numerous men adopt or adapt

homiletical outlines from other denominations. (3.) A great number “blend” and “mix” the previous formats (hybrid). (4.) Some drift into whatever will work for them. In these instances, a discernible form is usually not evident. (5.) A final group flounders.

Why are there diverse and non-uniform results when each minister has been trained in the traditional textual style and usually the topical style as well? I believe that, by the acceptance or abandonment of the textual and topical structures, each pastor is asserting his right to accept or to reject that which is compatible or alien to his personal temperament, abilities, background, and individual style. To continue in Walther’s methodology is good and necessary for those who are inherently comfortable with analytic and synthetic outlines, but for others it is an unnatural obligation and an unnecessary burden which can produce ineffective preaching. They rightly seek “containers” in which they can innately and wholeheartedly place their rhetorical handling of Scripture. Should we not allow a flexibility that directs students to seek formats which are as natural to them as were Walther’s designs for himself? Should we not readily assist those who are frustrated in their sermon-writing by offering additional materials which will provide other viable configurations for their exposition of the text? Should we not consider the preacher’s inherent sensibilities, rather than demanding a conformity to Walther or a professor or another pastor’s sermon structure? Should we not recognize the wisdom of David’s refusal to wear Saul’s armor?

Heedful of the results from the collapse of Puritan preaching and aware of the dangers likely in the present exclusive devotion to the textual and topical sermon methods, I respectfully offer a new homiletic premise which embraces the following tenets:

- (1.) The textual (analytic and synthetic) and topical (synthetic) configurations are not superior methods of outlining for every pastor.
- (2.) Excluding bizarre, outlandish, and fanciful forms, there are several “tried” and “tested” optional formats in the world of homiletics which are competent and worthy to convey biblical doctrines and confessional beliefs.

- (3.) Sermon configurations are “containers” for scriptural truths and, among the proven but diverse designs, there is an equality, depending upon each homileician’s discovery of that configuration or those configurations which are best suited to his personality, social background, sensibilities, and individual uniqueness.

A new textbook now in preparation will present textual but non-analytic and non-synthetic approaches, emphasizing the reintroduction of the textual (narrow sense) narrative homily and the textual (narrow sense) expository homily. Dr. Caemmerer defines the homily as “restating the meaning of the text and appending the observations and lessons”³⁹ as it interprets, exhorts, comforts, admonishes, divides Law and Gospel, and so on. Whereas the analytic and synthetic designs unify the sermon by the parts giving solution to the theme, the homily offers an entirely different design. The story is the natural organic order of the narrative, while the verse by verse flow of the expository homily is its natural line of direction.

The narrative is rooted in the Old Testament, Yiddish folktales, and, most significantly, the parables of Jesus. Martin Luther and John Calvin were two of the more prominent expository preachers. It is safe to assume that, if the founders of the Missouri Synod had drawn their homiletic models from Christ, we should all be narrative preachers. Similarly, if they had followed Luther as homileician, we should be using expository configurations. However, we are all textual-analytic and textual-synthetic pulpiteers because our forefathers were influenced by their German backgrounds and specifically by Dr. C. F. W. Walther.

The new textbook in preparation will contain, firstly, a literary analysis of Walther’s eloquent syntax and masterful usage of tropes. Secondly, definitions, explanations, outlines, and fully-written examples will be given of the following non-analytic and non-synthetic sermons:

- (1.) The textual (narrow sense) narrative homily (three models).
- (2.) The textual (narrow sense) expository homily (three examples).

- (3.) Several “blended” or “mixed” homilies.
- (4.) Several creative homilies featuring the modern parable.

ENDNOTES

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