



# Ordering ideas or ordering experience? E.L. Lowry's<sup>1</sup> homiletical plot structure – an exploration and evaluation

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## Abstract

### Ordering ideas or ordering experience? E.L. Lowry's homiletical plot structure – an exploration and evaluation

*In this article E.L. Lowry's homiletical theory is explored and investigated. The basis of his theory is that the view that a sermon is structured according to the ordering of ideas, arranged under an enforced extra-textual theme (idea), implies an outdated approach. He argues that instead of ideas experience should rather be ordered in a (new) homiletical theory in which the hearer of a sermon plays a prominent part. In this regard Lowry develops a profile of a sermon containing a narrative plot. In this suggested plot Lowry discerns five sequential stages: upsetting the equilibrium, analysing the discrepancy, disclosing the clue to a possible resolution, experiencing the gospel and anticipating the consequences. From this perspective he also suggests guidelines for preparing a sermon regarding the following: the form and focus of the sermon, the way in which an outline for the plot is produced and the goal of a sermon. Lastly he also directs attention to creativity in sermon-making. In the concluding section of the article Lowry's homiletical theory is evaluated critically.*

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## Opsomming

### Die ordening van idees of die ordening van ervarings? Die struktuur van E.L. Lowry se homiletiese plot – 'n ondersoek en evaluering

*In hierdie artikel word die homiletiese teorie van E.L. Lowry nagegaan en ondersoek. Die basis vir sy teorie is dat die uitgangspunt dat 'n preek gebou word op idees wat dwangmatig gerangskik word volgens 'n buitetekstuele tema (idee), 'n verouderde standpunt impliseer. Hy voer aan dat in plaas van idees, ervarings eerder georden moet word in 'n (nuwe) homiletiese teorie waarin die hoorder van die preek 'n prominente rol vervul. Ten opsigte van hierdie siening ontwikkel Lowry 'n preekprofiel met 'n narratiewe plot. In hierdie voorgestelde plot onderskei Lowry vyf opeenvolgende fases: om die ewewig te versteur, om die oënskynlike teenstrydigheid te analiseer, om die sleutel tot 'n moontlike oplossing uit te wys, om die evangelie te ervaar en om die konsekwensies hiervan te antisipeer. Vanuit hierdie perspektief gee hy ook riglyne vir die voorbereiding van 'n preek: die vorm en fokus van die preek, die manier waarop die buitelyne vir die plot van die preek daargestel word en die doel van die preek. Hy vestig ook die aandag op kreatiwiteit in die maak van 'n preek. In die slotgedeelte van die artikel word die homiletiese teorie van Lowry krities beoordeel.*

## 1. Introduction

Communicating the message of the gospel is in effect the core task of any minister. Part of this process of communication is the utilisation of the possibilities a sermon offers. At this point, however, the ways part. Certainly most people will agree that the Triune God should be the centre of a sermon, that the redemption of Christ should be focused on, that a sermon should serve to strengthen the personal relationship between God and man. Some people emphasise the cognitive content of a sermon; others regard the conveyance of biblical information as important; some maintain that the emotional as well as the rational aspect of man's existence should receive equal attention; that the spreading of the good news of the gospel should be emphatically proclaimed.

Lowry's contribution, however, emphasises that the intersection of human problems and the gospel's response can be effected by applying a narrative plot in a sermon. According to Lowry a sermon is more than a structure; it actually is a process; an ordering of experience and one way of giving sermon-making direction.

Before discussing the homiletical views of Lowry in detail it could be profitable to succinctly outline the homiletical background in which his views are embedded. Theological research on the process of making sermons during the eighties focused on a variety of aspects regarding narrative sermons. Prominent names in this regard are Charles Rice, Fred Craddock, David Buttrick and Eugene Lowry. Perhaps Craddock (1978; 1981; 1985) and Buttrick can be regarded as pioneers in the field of research on renewing the way of preaching. They accentuated that a switch should be made from thematistic to narrative preaching. In his book *Preaching* (1985) Craddock's main theme is the inductive form of preaching. He regards this form of preaching as the most relevant for today because the inductive form of preaching starts with the experience and situation of the hearer (cf. also Long, 1988:55-77; Johnston, 2001:20; Nelson & Ralston, 2005:1-10). David Buttrick expresses his views on renewal in preaching especially in his two major works: *Homiletic: moves and structures* (1987) and *The liberation of preaching* (1994). One of his main theses is that preaching texts does not resemble static data, but contains moves and structures that should be accounted for, and integrated in a sermon.

More or less between these exponents of renewal in preaching the name of Lowry appears, especially on account of his book *The homiletical plot: the sermon as narrative art form* (1980).

- **Necessity and relevance of topic**

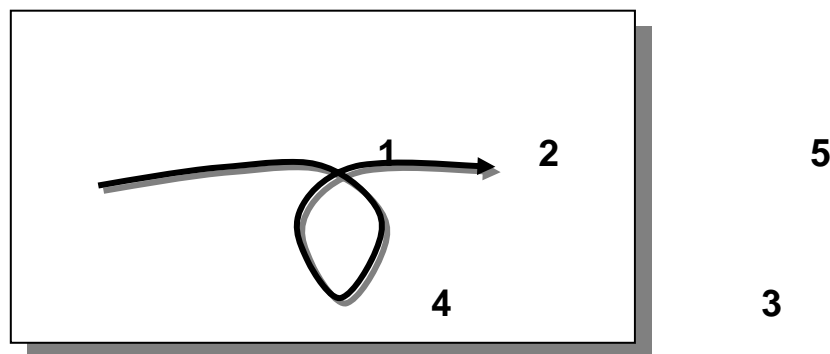
The necessity for the research underlying this article is that in the context of Lowry's work during the seventies and eighties – the period when narrative preaching became a central issue in homiletical research – Lowry very pertinently accentuated the idea and function of the homiletical plot. He also maintained a very specific and personal view on the functionality of the homiletical plot.

- **Method**

The method employed for the research undertaken for this article implies analysis, interpretation and synthethis of relevant homiletical material applicable to the topic. It should, however, be stressed that a closer exploration of Lowry's views forms an important element in this investigation and is followed by applicable comment and evaluation.

## 2. The homiletical plot

E.L. Lowry's contribution to the field of homiletics thus is a suggested profile of a sermon containing a narrative plot. The five basic movements that he distinguishes comprise five "stages" that eventually function like an outline for a sermon. Lowry (1980:25) contends that because a sermon is an event-in-time, a process, and not a collection of parts, *sequence* rather than *structure* should be emphasised. The five basic sequential stages of a typical sermon as process constitute a plot which may be visualised in the following way:



The different stages imply in sequential form the following: upsetting the equilibrium; analysing the discrepancy; disclosing the clue to a possible resolution; experiencing the gospel, and anticipating the consequences (cf. also Janse van Rensburg, 2003:81-82).

### 2.1 Upsetting the equilibrium

In the opening stage, a preacher should pose the problem to be addressed in a way that engages his listeners. Within the first two or three minutes listeners' interest should be stimulated, and it is best achieved by upsetting the listeners' equilibrium. Lowry (1980:30) believes that the primary purpose of sermon introductions is to produce *imbalance* for the sake of *engagement*. This imbalance can inter alia be achieved by implementing ambiguity. Ambiguity arouses interest because as human beings we have a commonly felt need to resolve it. According to Lowry ambiguity and its resolution is a basic ingredient of a sermon. One major discrepancy or problem usually is the issue to be addressed. Lowry (1980:31) regards as central task of any sermon the resolution of that particular central ambiguity. The function of the strategy of upsetting the equilibrium of the listener can be compared to the opening scene of a play in which the element of tension or conflict is introduced at the outset.

A sermon introduction may upset the equilibrium of members of a congregation by means of an inconsequential ambiguity which serves simply to stimulate interest in the sermonic process (Lowry 1980:25).

Lowry offers several suggestions to the preacher intent on triggering ambiguity in the listener's mind and heart.

- If the introduction involves an ambiguity that is not actually related to the central plot, the preacher must, however, be careful that it does not occupy the listener's attention at the expense of his/her focus on the central plot of the sermon.
- Very often the opening ambiguity will be the central discrepancy, especially in sermons addressing a contemporary situation and in sermons which are expositional or doctrinal in nature. Lowry's proposed objective is to trigger not simply intellectual ambiguity, but also an existentially felt ambiguity.
- While establishing disequilibrium is the key to beginning a sermon, the next step is to maintain its effect and not to let it slip away in the next few moments of the sermon.
- Although the resolution of the plot is left hanging and incomplete in the first stage of the sermon, direction to the ambiguity must be given. Without disclosing the clue to its resolution, the listener needs to know the plot's direction (cf. Kellerman, 1991:478; Vos, 1995:300). Although the specific problem and its consequences may be clear, what generates interest at this stage of the sermon is the lack of resolution (Lowry, 1980:32-35). Suspense should be created in the listener's mind, because he/she does not know how the issue will be resolved. According to Lowry (1980:35) the first step in a sermon should be to upset the equilibrium.

## **2.2 Analysing the discrepancy**

Once the opening problem of the sermon has been disclosed and the listeners have been thrown into disequilibrium, the second stage in the sermon process begins: the task of probing the problem. At this stage the preacher diagnoses the discrepancy or problem, and asks, "Why?" This diagnostic stage is not only the most lengthy of the five – often an amount of time equivalent to the other stages combined – but it is the most critical stage. Two reasons to substantiate this statement can be given:

- Since the sermon seeks to resolve a problem or discrepancy, the analysis of the discrepancy determines the shape of the sermon as well as the good news of the gospel proclaimed. Lowry's strategy assumes a correlation between the human problem and the gospel's response. The effectiveness of the cure prescribed to resolve the human dilemma depends on the accuracy of the diagnosis (Lowry, 1980:36-37).
- This stage actually presents "the chief vehicle" to maintain the plot of the sermon (Lowry, 1980:37). At this stage the preacher seeks to create the kind of suspense experienced while reading a good detective story that leaves one constantly to wonder who did it. In a detective story the desire to learn the villain's identity propels the reader forward. "Likewise the suspense of not yet knowing why things are as they are ... provides the homilist the opportunity of diagnostic wrestling – of theologizing" (Lowry, 1980:38).

Lowry, however, stresses that preachers often rather opt for description or illustration instead of diagnosis. "What is missing is depth – a probing into the causative ingredients responsible for the situation" (Lowry, 1980:39; cf. Robinson & Robinson, 2003:51-54). Diagnosis or analysis is what is needed – not description or illustration (cf. Peterson, 2005:1-11). Lowry uses the example of a sermon on apathy that calls for a diagnosis of the causes of apathy. If a hearer discovers, while listening to a sermon on apathy, that fear of rejection may be a cause of his or her own apathy, then the gospel will speak to the hearer, because the good news of God's acceptance reduces his/her fear of rejection by others. In this way, Lowry (1980:40) argues,

the purpose of the sermonic process of analysis is to uncover the areas of interior motivation where the problem is generated, and hence expose the motivational setting toward which any cure will need to be directed.

Lowry insists that the sermon should not only touch the behavioural level, but also the more complicated motivational level. To illustrate his point Lowry notes that in the story of the prodigal son, the text does not raise the issue of why the son left home. The preacher is thus free to imagine the motives for the son's departure. It can thus be imagined that perhaps a negative experience with the older brother, coupled with a desire to see the world, prompted the younger brother's leaving. The point is that the preacher cannot be contented with the mere analysis of human behaviour: the preacher

should go behind the simplicity of behaviour to the complexity of causality (Lowry, 1980:40-41).

During the preparatory stage of the sermon, the actual process of diagnosis/analysis is easier to state than the effect of the material studied. Ultimately, the preacher must repeatedly ask why the discrepancy or problem exists until he/she reaches the revelatory “aha” stage (Lowry, 1980:41-42). Since Lowry’s approach assumes a correlation between the human condition and the gospel’s response, the need for in-depth analysis is critical. “When this analysis is superficial, the gospel as proclaimed must of necessity feel like a ‘pat answer’; it will lack credibility” (Lowry, 1980:43).

Concerning the stage when the sermon is actually delivered, it is important for the preacher to cover the process of analysis inductively with the congregation in a fairly complete, though modified fashion. The same principle is operative in such a sermon as in a detective story where, although the author already knows who committed the crime, the reader experiences the drama of discovery by repeatedly asking, “Who did it?” In the sermon itself the process of analysis moves the listeners through numerous dead-end routes until the decisive clue is disclosed. If the clue to resolution (stage three) is to be existentially real, and if the gospel is to be heard (stage four), this stage must be prepared by outlining the ambiguity explicit in the analysis of the discrepancy. The purpose, then, for stage two is not simply to reach a resolution, but also to be prepared for the resolution to be developed (Lowry, 1980:45).

### **2.3 Disclosing the clue to the resolution**

Working with the assumption that we live in a cause-effect world, the ultimate goal of the problem-solving process is to provide the so-called “missing link” or an explanation that accounts for the problem. When the explanation is found and disclosed, it functions as a bridge from problem to solution, and enables the listeners to view the problem from a fresh perspective (Lowry, 1980:47).

Characteristic of the problem-solving process is also the encounter with numerous “dead-end” solutions that must be discarded so that one can press on towards the real solution which, once discovered, is in gestalt terms, the “aha,” the missing piece that completes the puzzle. Lowry (1980:48) states that such a revelatory clue should rather be *experienced* by the congregation rather than simply known as a result of information given.

Peculiar to the homiletical revelatory clue is the fact that it comes as a surprise; it is not exactly what one has anticipated; it turns things upside down. Lowry (1980:48) calls it “the principle of reversal”. He even states that the process of reversal as presented in a sermon can be likened to the action of pulling the rug out from under someone (Lowry, 1980:56). Of course, the preacher must first lay the rug before he pulls it. Then, with the rug well laid, the situation can be reversed. While the principle of reversal seems to characterise Jesus’ parables, the concept of reversal is found elsewhere in Scripture as well, for example in the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was a seemingly nonsensical command. This command actually implied to destroy the only logical means God had for fulfilling his promise to Abraham. However, Lowry believes that the principle of reversal is more than a literary device. It is rooted in the gospel, for there is something about the gospel which is a reversal of the world’s way of viewing truth. Lowry (1980:60) says that the fundamental mistake of the liberal Protestant pulpit of the last forty years has been that it presumed that the gospel is “continuous with” human experience. However, such a continuity can only exist after the gospel has reversed human experience by turning it upside down.

Lowry envisions the different stages of a sermon thus: The sermon should start by making contact with the members of a congregation at the point of their human predicament (stage one). The sermon then continues with an inductive analysis of the predicament (stage two) in order to disclose the clue to the resolution of the issue (stage three), by means of some kind of reversal, thereby setting the stage for the proclamation of the gospel.

## **2.4 Experiencing the gospel**

The listener’s readiness to experience the gospel is dependent on the depth of analysis achieved in the two previous stages. Regrettably, an attitude of impatience may lead to an improper diagnosis and cause a “homiletical short circuit” (Lowry, 1980:62-63) which is “a giant and ill-fated leap” from the beginning of stage two (analysis) to stage five – which is the stage of anticipating what can or ought to be done in the light of the intersection of the problem and the proclamation of the gospel. For example, the issue of one’s identity, an illustration Lowry uses, can be short-circuited if the preacher assumes that it is incumbent upon us to search for the self and proceeds to offer suggestions in the sermon on how people



might find their identity. However, it is a false assumption for it seeks to find what can only be given. Lowry (1980:63) argues that instead, the gospel declares that we have been found – that identity is a gift one can never obtain or reach on the basis of human effort.

Another critical factor is the matter of timing within the sermon. With respect to the above illustration, homiletically it would for example be fatal to announce this good news at the beginning of the sermon (Lowry, 1980:64). On the other hand, when the context has been properly set in stages one, two and three, when the congregation experiences the utter futility of the search for identity, then the gospel will be proclaimed effectively and credibly, i.e., the gospel does what it says. Of course, Lowry reminds us that the content of the gospel proclaimed in stage four must fit the diagnosis of stage three – the “cure must match the disease” (Lowry, 1980:64). It is not difficult to determine what the gospel has to say to a clearly and deeply diagnosed issue. Lowry (1980:65) even states that when the diagnostic homework has been done and the decisive clue has emerged, “the good news has fallen into place sermonically as though pulled by a magnet”.

According to Lowry’s strategy the sermon begins inductively (cf. Venter & Bang, 2005:84), moves towards the clue to resolution, revealing the dead-ends along the way, turning things upside down, and then it proclaims the gospel deductively. Once the gospel has been proclaimed, the homilist is ready to ask about the matter of the consequences.

## 2.5 Anticipating the consequences

Stage five explicates the future in the light of the good news experienced in stage four. “Plot-wise,” Lowry (1980:67) says, “it is the stage of effecting closure.” Essentially the preacher asks what can be anticipated in the light of the gospel’s intersection with the human condition. The sermon as homiletical plot is different in two important respects, when compared with the construction of the more traditional sermon.

- The traditional sermon reaches its climax in the conclusion’s invitation or call to commitment, whereas the sermon as homiletic plot reaches its climax in the resolution stage where everything is turned upside down and viewed in a fresh light (Lowry, 1980:68). The perception of apparent similarity between the two kinds of sermons is related to the fact that the final stage of the homiletical plot sermon, in which the consequences are anticipated, is in the

same position time-wise as the call to commitment of the traditional sermon.

- The second difference is manifestly theological. At the stage when the traditional sermon makes the invitation for a human response (the climax of the sermon), the sermon may sometimes be regarded as guilty of works righteousness for it puts the focus on us rather than on God's activity. "To make the call to commitment the central focus of a sermon is to place ourselves in the limelight, where we have no business being" (Lowry, 1980:69; cf. Cilliers, 1996:52-80). Lowry (1980:69) emphasises that the focus of our preaching is upon the decisive activity of God, not upon us, and hence the climax of any sermon should be stage four – the experiencing of the gospel. While human response is critical, it is not the centre of gravity for the sermon. What should be the centre is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The preacher is able to call for a response at stage five only because the gospel has effected a new freedom to choose (Lowry, 1980:69). "Freedom is a consequence of the grace of God" (Lowry, 1980:70). This truth is illustrated well in the story of the woman of Mark 14:1-10. The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed now generates the ability to respond (cf. Eslinger, 1989:83-84).

In summary, Lowry's "suspense-driven" strategy consists of five sequential stages: upsetting the equilibrium, analysing the discrepancy, disclosing the clue to resolution, experiencing the gospel, and anticipating the consequences.

While some modification in the five stages of the sermon process may be needed on occasion, Lowry (1980:76) stresses that "there is one essential form which I believe indispensable to the sermon event, and that one essential is ambiguity". Variations on the above five-step process may be made as long as the glue of ambiguity is preserved. The major exception occurs when preaching a biblical narrative sermon, because the biblical narrative has its own plot and its own ambiguity needing resolution. A narrative sermon does not need another plot line superimposed on top of it (Lowry, 1980:76). Other variations are also possible. Sometimes the anticipated consequences of the narrative plot may be unstated or only suggested. At other times, for example a funeral sermon, the opening stage of the sermon may be omitted. On still other occasions long drawn out diagnostic analyses may be inappropriate. Yet the most suitable way of achieving variety is by altering the form of the discrepancy from *why* to *how*, or *when*, or *where*. However, Lowry (1980:80) repeatedly stresses "whatever kinds of variation are

utilized in the plot formation of a sermon, the glue of appropriate, ambiguity is necessary”.

### **3. Ordering experience**

If the sermon is to become an event-in-time, Lowry believes it will require a paradigmatic shift in thinking about sermon preparation: it will demand a radical shift in thinking that moves from ordering ideas to ordering experience. The motivation for this thesis is that “re-experiencing the text through narrative preaching, the listeners are afforded the opportunity to recontextualize the biblical story in the landscape of contemporary soil” (Lowry, 1985:27; cf. also Hillis, 1997:2). Most preachers, observes Lowry, tend to think in terms of space rather than in terms of time when it comes to sermon preparation. As a result they set about ordering ideas when preparing a sermon. Instead, Lowry invites preachers to imagine a sermon as an ordering experience.

The change in perspective will focus preachers’ attention on the congregation rather than on a piece of paper in front of them. Knowing that the members of the congregation exist in time, preachers will perceive their work as doing something with the congregation’s twenty minutes of listening time (Lowry, 1985:13). What will arrest their “times”, says Lowry, is not ideational content, but a story (cf. Tucker, 2005:1-9). Such an approach involves action, movement (cf. Venter & Bang, 2005:624), duration – elements of time. Lowry (1985:13) argues that a moving sermon is more like a trip that takes us from here to there through the medium of time – from then to now. According to Lowry the compass readings for this trip are taken from Biblical narratives, in particular Jesus’ teaching strategy, which seems to order experience in time rather than ideas in space. However, as persons preparing sermons, preachers need to be aware of the full implications of this shift in focus from the ordering of ideas to the ordering of experiences. This paradigm shift encompasses several major considerations, which Lowry presents as a series of contrasts between the ordering of ideas and the ordering of experience (Lowry, 1985:14-28).

## Contrasts: the ordering of ideas and the ordering of experience

	Ordering ideas	Ordering experience
<b>Kind of sermon</b>	Traditional sermon  <i>Organising</i> material into a main thesis and subsidiary points  Blueprint  Declarative propositions; finality	Narrative sermon  <i>Shaping</i> the material in sequential order  Preacher listens to the gospel and shapes experience.  Road map  Questions guiding one towards one's destination
<b>Emphasis of the sermon</b>	Emphasis on <i>structure</i>	Emphasis on <i>process</i>
<b>Focus of the sermon</b>	Focus on <i>theme</i>	Focus on <i>event</i>
<b>Evaluation of the preparation process of a sermon</b>	Main concern is "Are you getting it said?"  (Substance)	Main concern is "Are you getting there?"  (Resolution)
<b>Structural form of the preparation stage</b>	Outline	Plot
<b>The means by which outline or plot is produced</b>	Outline: cognitive coherence	Plot: ambiguity and suspense
<b>Goal of the sermon</b>	Understanding the bottom line	Some kind of happening

### 3.1 Organising versus shaping

The first difference between ordering ideas and ordering experiences entails the difference between the task of organising and that of shaping. In the traditional sermon the preacher is usually advised to identify a main thesis and then organise subsidiary points

under the main point with a view to achieving unity of thought and focus. However, this approach is inadequate in several respects. One problem is that disunity characterises most traditionally prepared sermons. Lowry (1985:14-15) actually says that one speaks of attaining unity only when one assumes it is not already there. A typical traditional sermon often comprises several complete ideas barely glued together. Another problem associated with the traditional sermon is a lack of movement in the sermon. The disparate parts of the traditional sermon are complete thoughts. Lowry (1985:15) even notes that there is nothing that can close down attention more easily than a complete thought. An ever larger problem with the ordering of ideas is that this method assumes that the preacher has mastered the Biblical material, rather than being called into question and challenged by it. According to Lowry (1985:15) this method implies the following: "One gets the truth in place, declares it, puts it into a proposition. Putty in one's hands." But Scripture confronts us, Lowry (1985:15) argues – "It is we who need figuring out, not the Bible". Instead of controlling and organising, Lowry invites the preacher to listen and to shape experience by attending to movement rather than thought. Thus, the preacher's task is to shape experience, not organise ideas.

### **3.2 The form of the sermon**

A second difference between ordering ideas and ordering experience relates to the form of the sermon. If one's task is to organise ideas, the result will be a sermon form that is a *structure*. But if one's task is to shape experience then the sermon form will be a *process*. One way to note the difference is by comparing the sermon notes for organising ideas with those for shaping experience. The former moves vertically, resettling a building blue-print, while the latter moves horizontally, resembling a road map. A sermon as process moves in a more linear fashion, because life is experienced in time (Lowry, 1985:17; cf. also Petersen, 2005:1-12).

Another way to state the difference is by considering the grammar of the central points. If a sermon resembles a structure the key points are declarative propositions that convey finality, whereas in the sermon resembling a process the central points are questions and transition markers that function like road signs guiding one to the destination. Finally, if a sermon resembles a structure the points are often interchangeable, whereas in a sermon imagined as process the markers are like road signs that cannot be changed without

altering meaning. Lowry (1985:18) says "process road markers are in series".

### 3.3 Focus of the sermon

A third difference between ordering ideas and ordering experience in the preparation stage relates to the focus of the sermon. The preacher organising ideas into a structured form will invariably focus on a theme and seek to discover a unifying ideational thread (Lowry, 1985:19). In contrast, a preacher shaping experience into a process form will focus on events and, as Buechner testifies, if there is a theme, it emerges through the events that take place and the interaction of the characters (quoted by Lowry, 1985:19).

### 3.4 Evaluate the process

A fourth difference between ordering ideas and ordering experience in the preparation of a sermon relates to an important preparation principle. Lowry (1985:20) notes while doing the work of preparing a sermon, the preacher unconsciously evaluates his/her progress. If the preacher has learned to imagine the sermon as the ordering of ideas, then the yardstick for assessing progress will be *substance*: Are you getting it said? Substance as the underlying principle to evaluate a sermon, assumes that God's revelation in Scripture is essentially propositional in form. Yet, even those who subscribe to a non-propositional view of revelation seem to utilise the principle of substance. Lowry (1985:21) comments that it means that homiletical theory has drawn heavily upon the principles of rhetoric and "unwittingly borrowed a principle that is not altogether suitable for our task".

By contrast, if a preacher imagines the sermon as ordering experience, the measuring stick will be *resolution*: Are you getting there? However, Lowry (1985:20) cautions that "narrative trips are different from car trips in that often the resolution increasingly becomes more remote and difficult, apparently, until by some strange shift or move the resolution happens with utter surprise".

### 3.5 The structural form: outline or plot?

A fifth contrast between ordering ideas and ordering experience has to do with the final product of the preparation stage. "If the preacher is ordering ideas, the resultant structural form likely will be an outline and if the preacher is ordering experience the resultant process form is plot" (Lowry, 1985:22). The outline fits the *informational* image of

the kind of preaching it represents, whereas there is some kind of *sequential ordering* in a plot. The incorporation of narrative plot in a sermon includes an opening conflict, a complication, a watershed experience (generally involving a reversal) and a *denouement* (that is, the working out of the resolution) (Lowry, 1985:23).

### **3.6 The means by which an outline or plot is produced**

A sixth difference between ordering ideas and ordering experience in preparation relates to the means by which the preacher produces an outline or a plot. An outline is generally acceptable to those who seek to order ideas if it makes sense and communicates the central theme with clarity. What is critical is “cognitive coherence” (Lowry, 1985:24). By contrast, an effective plot-like sermonic product exploits ambiguity and suspense. The critical question will be whether ambiguity based on discrepancy is maintained successfully until the preacher is ready to resolve matters with the message of the gospel (Lowry, 1985:24). With narrative plot the focus is not on the test of coherence, but on the test of correspondence. The final question remains whether the ambiguity and/or suspense maintained by the preacher resonate as real as the listeners experience life.

### **3.7 Goal of a sermon**

A final contrast relates to the goal of the sermon. Understanding is the bottom line for those who imagine the sermon as implying the ordering of ideas, whereas some kind of happening is the critical issue for those who imagine the sermon as the ordering of experience. Lowry regards a sermon as an event-in-time, and hence, he opts for happening. Recognising that a radical shift in sermon preparation from the ordering of ideas to the ordering of experience will not occur without a “push”, Lowry believes that an appropriation of the power of story provides it.

## **4. Preliminary steps in utilising the homiletical plot**

Lowry identifies two preliminary and difficult stages of sermon preparation:

- **The stage of “wandering thoughtfulness”:** As the preacher contemplates Sunday’s sermon, he/she notes potential ideas, reads the lectionary texts, pulls out previously prepared long-range sermon planning notes, and checks the denominational

calendar. As Lowry (1980:17) rightly comments, "At best this stage is one of imagination; at worst it is the stage of anxiety."

- **The preliminary matter of settling on an idea for the sermon:** According to Lowry (1980:17) this stage represents a transition to a very peculiar state of knowing implicitly that a sermon can happen. Since Lowry believes the sermon implies a narrative plot, the idea for a sermon emerges at the intersection point between problem and solution. Thus, he suggests that preachers begin this preliminary preparation stage by choosing one of these two poles as a starting point and then moving thoughtfully in the opposite direction until the discrepancy is known and felt (Lowry, 1980:81).

The following steps are instrumental in giving birth to the idea for a sermon:

- Select a source like a biblical text, congregational need, ethical issue.
- Identify the material as either problematic, solutional, or resolutive.
- Press the problem or solution into more specificity by considering its opposite.
- Experience the discrepancy at the intersection point between problem and solution.
- Set the material within the five-stage pattern of the sermon plot explicated above (Lowry, 1980:83).

## **5. Creativity in sermon-making**

According to Lowry adapting the method of utilising a homiletical plot requires creativity on the part of the preacher. He thus also addresses the issue of how preachers can be more creative in their sermon preparation. Three convictions govern Lowry's (1985:98) suggestions on creativity in sermon preparation:

- Creativity is not something a few people possess, but rather a potential result we all possess to some degree.
- Although one cannot choose to be creative, one can choose the behavioural patterns that stimulate creativity.
- The key to creativity lies in releasing the creative preconscious mind from the controls of routine consciousness.



Lowry encourages preachers to behave in a certain way in order to be more creative during their sermon preparation time:

- He advises alternating work with other activities. Creativity is most likely to be released after one has experienced the hard work of focused, intensive, and conscious deliberation of the problem or issue of the text quite apart from any consultation of the exegetical experts and without reaching any conclusions about its resolution.
- Lowry urges preachers to prepare sermons by talking to oneself, with another person, by role playing, and by using free association. During the early stage of the gestation period of sermon preparation, creativity is often stimulated by discussing the idea of the sermon audibly with either someone present or without another person present. Lowry (1985:101) even suggests having a kind of role playing dialogue with the characters in the text.
- The most important factor, according to Lowry, is to begin writing a sermon before you think you are ready. In this respect Lowry is following the lead of narrative artists who speak of allowing the story to lead them towards the plot (Lowry, 1985:103-104).

## 6. Evaluation

### 6.1 Positive aspects of Lowry's homiletical plot

Lowry emphasises the value of narrative preaching – a relevant way of communicating the message of the gospel by also concentrating on the elements of story line in an event.

Scripture provides no single form that Christian sermons should apply. On the contrary, biblical authors applied a myriad of different methods to transfer the contents of their message – stories, parables, psalms and many more. The narrative form of preaching is a legitimate form of preaching, because people remember good stories. Stories enable listeners to identify with certain events and characters and thus experience the *truth* and applicability of the message in a very concrete way. Furthermore, stories paint mental pictures that influence the way people think (cf. Robinson & Robinson, 2003:11, 12).

Within this broader framework Lowry's views on the homiletical plot will be evaluated.

- **Capturing the attention of today's people**

Lowry's suggested narrative form of effective communication in preaching has the potential of capturing the attention of the people in today's pew (cf. Johnston, 2001:8-12) If, as Craddock suggests, the first goal of a sermon is to get heard, then Lowry's narrative plot, the impetus of the ongoing suspense of the story line, will have an impact on listeners. Lowry defines plot as "the moving suspense of a story from disequilibrium to resolution". According to Lowry plot is the journey from "problematic itch" to "resolutional scratch". Thus, a commendable feature of Lowry's strategy of shaping experiences in a sermon is that the unresolved tension in his homiletical plot has the power of pulling the listener along until the discrepancy is resolved. It is a listener-oriented style of preaching.

- **Lowry's method is listener-oriented**

Another positive aspect of Lowry's strategy of sermon-making and utilising the element of plot is its listener-oriented nature. Since Lowry encourages preachers to see their sermons as an investigative search for a resolution to the text's problem, this method overcomes many of the problems of the static outline and provides a way for listeners to become active participants in the preaching moment (Long, 1989:100; cf. Nelson & Ralston, 2005:2-7).

- **Sermon preparation receives attention**

Lowry's narrative approach also gives attention to sermon preparation. Lowry has provided preachers with a veritable road map to sermon preparation and communication. His three major works, *The homiletical plot* (1980), *Doing time in the pulpit* (1985), and *How to preach a parable* (1989), are essentially handbooks on how to preach a narrative sermon.

- **Emphasis on time-oriented preaching**

A final positive aspect of Lowry's narrative approach relates to his careful explanation of the paradigm shift required of those who wish to order experience rather than to order ideas. Anyone reading Lowry's discussion of the seven antitheses between ordering ideas and ordering experience cannot fail to grasp the difference between space-oriented discursive preaching and time-oriented narrative preaching.

## 6.2 Comment on Lowry's approach

- **More creativity required than the average preacher possesses**

Lowry's narrative approach may be a method that requires more creativity than the average preacher possesses. Lowry himself, however, anticipates this point of criticism and thus agrees that although creativity is a factor in preparing narrative sermons, creativity is not a gift possessed by the few, but rather a potential result stimulated by choosing the right behavioural patterns. Lowry's method is not easy to master. Indeed, it is a method that requires reading and re-reading his suggested stages, making a point of knowing what each stage requires the preacher to do, and how each step fits into the whole movement of the sermon (Blair, 1982:23-25).

Lowry's viewpoint that narrative preaching comes more naturally than preachers think can be questioned. Should this creativity not be regarded more as a gift of the Holy Spirit than an innate ability that can be practised by every preacher? Should the delicate nature and structure of preaching a narrative not also be taken more into consideration when stating "it comes more naturally than preachers think ..." (Lowry, 1989:74-78)?

- **Listener and preacher may not necessarily reach the same new insight**

A next aspect of Lowry's narrative form concerns its purported ability to lead the listener to the same new insights the preacher experienced while preparing the sermon (Bang, 2004:95-96). Lowry's homiletical plot strategy with its sudden reversal or loop attempts to lead the listeners to the place where they suddenly say, "Aha! I have discovered a new truth!" However, while the preacher may indeed gain new insights during the process of preparing to preach, Thomas Long (1989:100) says "it is not at all clear that marching someone else through those steps will generate the same 'Eureka!'" (cf. also Janse van Rensburg, 2003:48-49).

- **Not every sermon can be a problem-solving sermon**

Lowry's narrative plot is related to its strength, namely, its problem-solving normative pattern. Lowry's homiletical plot remains a problem-solving sermon form although he labels it "narrative" (Long, 1989:100). While the problem-solving form works to create listener interest as noted above, the concern in this respect is, as Thomas Long (1989:101) states, that "the preacher will be tempted to form every sermon to a pattern so well received". Moreover, if the

problem-solving strategy is repeatedly employed in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, it may lead the people to incorrectly conclude that the gospel's goal is solving problems (Long, 1989:101). Furthermore, how can one form be normative? As Long (1989:101) rightly argues: "The gospel is too rich, complex, and varied to be proclaimed through a single sermon form."

- **Homiletical plot can also become a forced method**

Furthermore, can it really be said that the implementation of the homiletical plot for every genre will not lead to a forced and binding method onto a text in the process of making a sermon? Narrative preaching essentially implies a kind of opposition to thematic (rather thematistic) preaching.

Thematic (or thematistic) preaching implies that a theme (an idea) from outside a preaching text is forced onto a text. Surely emphasising the function of plot in narrative preaching stands in opposition to preaching an idea (theme) from outside a text. As a (forced) *method* in composing a sermon, strict and general adherence to the elements of a plot, however, also boils down to a forced method. When it is required that any sermon from whatever text genre (cf. De Klerk & Janse van Rensburg, 2005:19-21; cf. Arthurs, 2005:1-12) should have a plot, this method also becomes enforced, and acts as a straightjacket (cf. also Eslinger, 1989:86). In this regard the elements Janse van Rensburg (2003:59-63) indicates in developing guidelines (not a fixed method) for a narrative sermon seem more accessible. The elements Janse van Rensburg highlights are the introduction, events, resolution and conclusion.

- **No substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit**

With due appreciation for the pioneering work of Lowry, and the way in which he utilises the homiletical plot in sermons (cf. Eslinger, 1989:89-93), it can finally be stated that no single method can replace the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind of a preacher in the process of preparing a sermon from whatever genre in Scripture.

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