

## CHAPTER 4

### TEXT-GUIDED PREACHING

#### 4.1 Introduction

A theory of preaching has to integrate at least four basic elements: preacher, congregation, text, and sermon. Chapter 4 deals with a theory of preaching that insists that the relationship between text and sermon has to be controlled by what the text says and does. It insists, in other words, that the rhetorical function of a biblical text must be allowed to guide the function of a sermon on the text. We may call this type of preaching that takes the rhetorical claim of the text seriously text-guided preaching.

This type of preaching has been advocated by Thomas Long, who believes that readers' understanding of a text is controlled in some way by the literary and rhetorical dynamics of the text and that sermons can be guided by that control (1989a, 21). The movement from text to sermon is to be controlled and guided by the text itself. The pivotal homiletical question is "How may the sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?" (1989a, 33).

For a long time academic disciplines, including biblical studies and homiletics, have embraced a representational view of language. Such a view holds that the primary function of language is to represent or depict facts or truths. Historical criticism of the Bible—which seeks to explore historical facts

behind the biblical texts—and traditional preaching—which seeks to explore the biblical texts for pure, timeless truths—resonate with the modern, representational view of language.

Text-guided preaching, however, assumes a view of language that recognizes the performative dimension of language. According to this view, people use language to perform a variety of acts, such as commanding, promising, praising, asking, as well as stating and describing. Developed in the middle of the twentieth century by philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and J. L. Austin (1911-1960), the new understanding of language has been appropriated by biblical scholars and homileticians. This is the main concern of section 2 (“Language, Interpretation, and Preaching”) of the present chapter.

Preaching concerns not only the text-to-sermon movement but also the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. It is helpful to explain the relationship within the hermeneutical-communicative framework. We may see the preacher as interpreter and as communicator; we may see sermon development as consisting of a hermeneutical process and a homiletical or communicative process.

So the preacher as interpreter begins a hermeneutical process by interpreting first of all the practical situations of the congregation. So in interacting with a biblical text, the preacher carries it out for the congregation. The preacher as communicator seeks to regenerate by means of the sermon what he has learned and experienced from the text for the communal life of the congregation and for the individual members.

The hermeneutical and homiletical issues are discussed in the third and fourth sections of this chapter. Section 3 (“The Hermeneutical Process”) deals with the contextual and textual aspects of the hermeneutical process. The preacher as interpreter tries to understand both the contemporary context of the congregation and the rhetorical dynamics of the text. Preaching seeks to connect the experiential world of the congregation and the experience of the rhetorical impact of the text. This section considers hermeneutical issues specifically in connection with psalms, focusing on how psalms create experiential impact.

Section 4 (“The Homiletical Process”) deals with the movement from text to sermon. It presents four general text-to-sermon paths that preachers can follow: movement-to-movement, conflict-to-conflict, insight-to-insight, and mood-to-mood. The central idea is that a sermon’s communicative goal has to be informed by the text’s rhetorical intent.

#### **4.2 Language, Interpretation, and Preaching**

Until the middle of the twentieth century, a restricted understanding of language had dominated academic disciplines. It was thought that language mirrored or pictured reality. The traditional, representational understanding of language has been seriously challenged by new understandings that take into account the social dimension of language. The new, richer and wider views insist that language is interwoven with social practices and activities and that words are used to perform conventional, linguistic acts.

The performative understanding of language is quite suitable for the disciplines of biblical interpretation and preaching. Biblical texts and sermons can be seen as performing a diversity of communicative acts that intend to achieve some intentional effects. Biblical texts and sermons can evoke noncognitive experiences and issue commands or promises, as well impart insights and ideas.

#### **4.2.1 Modern Developments**

Throughout the history of the Christian church the Bible has been studied for God's message, for what God had said. The Bible has been used as the main source of God's truth. Traditionally, theologians have explored the Bible for timeless, revealed truths with the aim of developing the solid foundations for theological system. Likewise, preachers have expounded biblical texts for divine truths they can use to edify the community of faith.

This traditional practice of reading and preaching the Bible, however, was challenged by the introduction into biblical interpretation of the historical-critical methodology. Historical criticism approached the Bible as a human record, subjecting it to "objective, critical" enquiry to determine whether biblical accounts were in fact "historically reliable." Biblical accounts were discussed and explained mainly for the purpose of determining historical facts. In this respect historical criticism reflects a modern understanding of language.

A modern view of language generally assumes that language expresses thought and thought represents reality. Modern empiricism, on the one hand,

explains that ideas in the mind are impressions created by objects in the world. Ideas merely mirror objects. Rationalism, on the other hand, explains that ideas are formed by the mind by conceptualizing sense data deposited by objects in the world. It denies that ideas passively mirror objects. It asserts that ideas represent objects. Ideas are conceptual representations. So for modern thinkers, thought either mirrors or represents objects in the world.

With respect to language, modern thinkers assume that its primary function is to express thought and try to explain its meaning in terms of representation or reference. Words express ideas and have meaning by virtue of their referents, the objects they refer to or picture. Those scholars who emphasize the centrality of historically critical methods in biblical interpretation—and thus reduce what the Bible says to particular historical facts—in fact embrace the modernist agenda of equating meaning with reference.

While conservative Christian scholars and preachers have continued the traditional practice of explicating the Bible for God's truth, liberal Christian scholars and preachers have turned to the experiential significance of the Bible. For many contemporary liberals, to understand a biblical text is to grasp the meaning or the experiential significance of the text; and to communicate a biblical text is to enable the church to experience the meaning of the text. They tend to focus on the effects that a biblical text has on the reader. For them preaching is a reenactment of the experience of a text.

#### **4.2.2 New Developments**

For nearly four decades Anthony Thiselton has persistently advocated the need to attend to the performative dimension of biblical texts in biblical interpretation and theology (1999, 144). It is his fundamental conviction that biblical texts must be regarded as performing a variety of speech acts, such as declaring or proclaiming, praising, witnessing, pronouncing, trusting, and most especially promising (1999, 144-145).

He also emphasizes that a single passage can embody multiple speech acts. In other words, a single locutionary action may perform several illocutionary acts. Hebrews 1:1-4, for example, performs “several multilayered, multidirectional actions,” such as preaching, confessing, praising, arguing, celebrating (1999, 146).

In focusing on the performative aspects of the text, Thiselton is fully aware of the logical dependence of speech acts on what John Searle calls “institutional” and “brute” facts. So he writes that the relationship between linguistic action and extra-linguistic states of affairs “remains exceedingly subtle, complex, and diverse from case to case” (1999, 147).

Thiselton is wary of hermeneutical traditions that tend to restrict what language can do to a single function. He has endorsed the later Wittgenstein’s view that language is like “the tools in a tool-box” (Wittgenstein 1973, sec. 11) and is critical of those who insist, to use Wittgenstein’s words, “that language always functions in one way, always serve the same purpose” (1973, sec. 304). Thiselton agrees with Wittgenstein’s attempt to rescue language “from its burial beneath an abstract Cartesian tradition that tends to equate language with

argument or description alone. In Jesus Christ the Word was made *flesh*; Cartesian Protestantism threatens to turn flesh back into abstracted *word* again” (1999, 145).

Thiselton also sees the need to rescue biblical language from Rudolf Bultmann’s program of interpreting the entire language of New Testament strictly in existential or volitional terms. “Bultmann lapses into a generally noncognitive view of New Testament language” (1999, 148). Embracing the “Kantian fact-value duality” Bultmann dismisses the descriptive or referential dimension of biblical language, reducing biblical passages about states of affairs into assertions about “existential self-involvement and value.” Bultmann’s major fault is that he accepts a “crude distinction between descriptive, expressive, and volitional utterances, as if these were virtually three self-contained, self-sufficient modes of discourse” (1999, 149).

Hence for Thiselton it is fundamental for biblical interpretation to take into consideration the multi-dimensional character of biblical language. He has turned to Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle to liberate biblical hermeneutics from its imprisonment to with simplistic and deterministic views of language and biblical interpretation. It is Thiselton’s fundamental conviction that understanding the biblical text is more than just recovering the intentions of the author; is more than just determining what it is referring to; is more than just discerning what would count as an appropriate response.

To understand the biblical text is to understand diverse things it is communicating, including revealing something about the author, pointing or

alluding to relevant states of affairs, and guiding the audience to transformative experience. In Thiselton's own words, important paradigmatic biblical illocutions "(1) *entail serious obligations on the part of the speaker*; (2) *presuppose serious institutional facts* (which in the sense identified by Searle ... rest on extralinguistic 'brute' facts); and (3) *achieve transformative effects not by causal perlocution but through institutional illocution*" (1999, 237).

#### **4.2.3 Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation**

In *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (1996) Nancey Murphy argues that the theories of language developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin can lead to a more adequate account of religious language (1996, chap. 5). These philosophers rejected the widely held idea of "language as a mirror or picture of reality," replacing it with a new image. "The new image is language as a tool or language as action. Both Austin and Wittgenstein emphasize the *use* of language to do things in the social world" (1996, 111).

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein tries to correct the distorted idea that our language is mainly about things in the world by devising a variety of language games, in which participants can be seen as trying to attain certain concrete objectives by using language as a tool. What is instructive about Wittgenstein's strategy is that we can dissect our everyday language as a myriad of language games. This strategy does help us see that language is not entirely about things in the world.



Thus it is pertinent to reject the conservatives' referentialism—the view that theological language is primarily about reality. Murphy also argues that we should as well reject the liberals' expressivism—the view that theological language is essentially about inner experiences—since language involves rules and rules cannot be privatized.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the performative aspect of language is vitally important in approaching the biblical discourses. It encourages us to locate the meaning of the biblical discourse within the reality of the corporate Christian life. The task of the interpreter is to describe the forms of life and relevant communal practices that the biblical language embodies. Wittgenstein's remark "In the beginning was the deed" is true in the case of the biblical discourse.

Murphy's account of Austin's speech-act theory is more extensive than her account of Wittgenstein's idea of language. One of her objectives in expounding Austin's fundamental idea that "all language needed to be understood primarily in terms of what the speaker is *doing* in uttering it" (1996, 114) is to make the crucial point that reference and expression are determined by, and thus logically dependent upon, an understanding of what the speaker is doing with language (1996, 115).

Austin calls instances of language use "speech acts" and in *How To Do Things with Words* examines the conditions for "felicitous" or happy speech acts. To use one of Murphy's own examples, a speaker, presumably a teacher, who says to a student "Thank you for closing the door" is in effect performing a

speech act of thanking if “Thank you for x” is a conventional way of expressing gratitude (a primary condition).

Furthermore, the happiness of this speech act also requires among other things that the student actually closed a door (a representative condition) and the speaker is grateful for the student’s action (an affective condition). Although this speech act requires both reference and expression, neither is primary. Murphy explains:

So reference and expression are both essential to most speech acts, but the question of the nature of the speech act—the question of what one is attempting to do with the sentence—is prior, since this determines the sorts of inner attitudes that are appropriate and determines, as well, what sort of relation there needs to be between language and the world. From this perspective, any account of language that attempts to *begin* with representation or expression is doomed to inadequacy. (1996, 115)

Murphy attempts to show how a speech-act theory may shape the practice of biblical interpretation (1996, 122-126). The first step in speech-act analysis of biblical texts is to “take the texts to be analogous to speech acts... as opposed to either (mere) expressions of religious awareness or (mere) factual accounts” (1996, 122). Murphy distinguishes and explains—in terms of various types of biblical criticism and with some concrete examples—five types of conditions that need to be fulfilled for a biblical speech act to be considered happy. They are linguistic and social conventions, referential and expressivist or psychological conditions, and uptake.

Murphy cautions us though that speech-act analysis should not be taken as a complete theory of biblical interpretation but rather as a guideline that tells us

what kinds of factors are relevant to an adequate understanding of biblical texts (1996, 126).

Murphy addresses the debate in the discipline of biblical interpretation regarding the question of the location of meaning, the question whether meaning is in “front” or “behind” or “in” the text. She is convinced that in order to understand what a text is doing we have to consider all the relevant dimensions, authorial, textual, social, and reader-response (1996, 126).

She agrees with Friedrich Schleiermacher and those who locate meaning in the author’s intention. “One condition for a happy speech act is uptake, which involves understanding what the author intended to do by means of the passage in question” (1996, 124). This does not mean, however, that we need to reconstruct or recover what was in the mind of the author at the time of writing. As Murphy puts it, “the recognition of authorial intent does not require imagination or empathy so much as knowledge of the linguistic and social conventions of the author’s time” (1996, 124).

#### **4.2.4 Speech-Act Theory and Homiletics**

Lucy Rose points out that speech-act theory has partly influenced the development of the new, transformational understandings of preaching that have emerged in the past three decades. One of the basic convictions “about language that characterizes transformational views of preaching,” Rose writes, “is that words both say things and do things, that words are events. Two influences here are speech act theory and the new hermeneutic” (1997, 67).

She singles out Craddock's early, influential work *As One without Authority* as a primary channel through which J. L. Austin's speech-act account of language entered homiletical discussion.

Craddock sees Wittgenstein's account of language as an early attempt to overcome a restricted view of language that insists that "words serve only as signs pointing to the discovered or discoverable data" (2001, 28). Wittgenstein insisted that language should be studied when it is at work, that is, in its everyday use, "because speaking is part of an activity, a form of life, and is to be understood within that context."

Craddock sees Austin's account of language, which emphasizes that words have a rich and wide range of power, as a direct challenge to "the tyranny of the single perspective" (2001, 28). "Austin has reminded us," he states, "of the creative or 'performative' power of words. Words not only report something; they do something. Words are deeds" (2001, 29). Craddock is convinced that such a dynamic view of language offers "fresh possibilities for new power in the pulpit." (2001, 27).

Thomas Long's homiletical theory certainly echoes speech-act theory. Long insists that what constitutes an understanding of a biblical text is neither an abstract idea nor some noncognitive aesthetic experience but a claim it makes upon the reader (1989b, 84). Such approach to the text has a direct implication for preaching. "Biblical texts *say* things that *do* things, and the sermon is to say and do those things too." What are the kinds of actions that the biblical texts perform?

Some texts form Christian identity through the transmission of doctrine, others render biblical characters powerfully “present” through narration, some evoke wonder or provoke memory, and still others issue ethical demands. The list could go on, of course, since texts are multifaceted, and every text possesses its own unique and complex set of intentionalities. (1989b, 84)

What are the kinds of claims that the biblical texts may make upon contemporary readers? Long recognizes that a particular text may make different claims, depending on a congregation’s current situation. “Texts potentially make many claims, and a change in congregational situation would also alter the results of the exegesis and therefore the tasks of the sermon” (1989b, 87).

For instance, Romans 8:28-39, which affirms that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” may engender an empowering sermon of reassurance and hope for a troubled and distressed congregation. But in the context of a congregation that holds a “sunshine and success” perspective of the gospel, the same text may engender an entirely different sermon.

To an openly troubled church, Romans 8:28-39 speaks a word of encouragement and cheer. In the context of this congregation, though, a group trying desperately to remain at ease by carefully stepping over the threatening places in life and hewing to the smoothly cheerful path, the very same text speaks another word, initially of confrontation but finally of liberation from superficial faith. (1989b, 88).

Cas Vos asserts that the language of preaching must clearly (1) communicate a particular content, (2) perform a particular linguistic act, and (3)

achieve the intended effect (2005, 328). Sermons have to incorporate invariably these three levels of language. The preacher must have clarity about what she wants to say. She also needs to know what she intends to do with her words.

Vos elaborates:

Every sermon should have one or more focal points. At the second level, the homiletician must know what he/she is trying to achieve with the sermon. He/she should have clarity about where he/she wants the listener to progress. Is this a sermon of comfort and hope, or is it a sermon intended to give the listener insight into a crisis or issue? At the third level, the force of the linguistic act is important. The question is, does the sermon come across so convincingly that those who hear it will believe what the preacher is saying? (2005, 329)

#### **4.3 The Hermeneutical Process**

Understanding the Bible requires a hermeneutical process. It requires steps to glean the message of the biblical text from the perspective of present life situation. At the same time biblical hermeneutics presupposes some particular understanding of the message of the Bible. For many readers it is about the relationship between God and people, about how God dealt with his people and how his people participated in his movement in history. The Bible reveals the relationship between God and his people, and the relationship it reveals is dialogical. As H. J. C. Pieterse puts it, God treated his people as “his dialogue partners and allies in his movement in history,” as Jesus’ ministry, which perfectly embodied God’s will, revealed (2001, 4).

This presupposition shapes our hermeneutical process. So to interpret the Bible is to interpret texts about how God interacted with his people from the standpoint of our present reality. To interpret the Bible is to extend the dialogical

interaction between God and his people beyond the text, to “view this relationship in our context, in terms of the mindset of people living in our own day and age” (Pieterse 2001, 4). The aim of biblical interpretation is to make the message of the Bible relevant to us. The message of the Bible “needs to be alive, relevant and directed at the circumstances of the listeners” (Pieterse 2001, 17).

#### **4.3.1 Understanding Our Existential World**

We agree with Pieterse who begins his homiletical theory with an account of the situation of the congregation. Preachers, as interpreters of the Bible, must be interpreters of their congregation also. They need to engage in various types of conversation with their congregation. They “should be thoroughly acquainted with their listeners, their circumstances, experiences, needs and problems” (Pieterse 2001, 4).

C. J. A. Vos also emphasizes the importance of understanding “the experiential world of the listener” (2005, 289). This is, he elaborates, “the world in which people think, experience and believe; the way they experience the world in relationships, in society and community, e.g. in church and within the sphere of their public responsibilities. Hence, the homiletician needs to be a child of his/her time.”

Referring to pain and longing as basic features of our experiential world, Vos says that preachers must address in their sermons the everyday, diverse manifestations of pain and suffering.

Pain and longing remain constant, but the experience of everyday life differs from person to person. It is important that a sermon takes this into account. Pain always contains elements of longing and hope, but a sermon should allow the listener to begin to feel that his/her personal darkness is not so impenetrable to light after all. A sermon serves as a source of hope at times of disappointment and disillusionment, because it relays the fact that God concerns himself with our everyday affairs. (2005, 292).

Vos holds that the preacher must foster an inclusive view of the listeners. The listeners “are not necessarily only those people whose beliefs are similar to those of the preacher, but also those who have strayed from the Church. The homiletician requires those who are near and far to the Church” (2005, 297).

For Vos, poetry, painting, music, stories and film all furnish windows into the complex experiential world (2005, 292). The arts are creative forms of expressing various levels of everyday experience. Poems, for example, express not only “the depths of human experience, but also the crest of its waves. We can be carried along by the currents, or almost drowned by the maelstroms.... In poetry, life is described on every level—its riches, its poverty, its joy and its pain” (2005, 292).

Even comic book films like *Spider-Man*, *Superman Returns*, *Daredevil*, and *Hulk* often offer social commentary as well as entertainment (2005, 295). For example, Hulk, one of the comic book superheroes, is driven by anger, a key motif that “makes the Hulk story relevant for a world in which anger is increasingly unleashed and expressed in numerous ways,” as Vos comments (2005, 296).



### 4.3.2 Understanding Textual Speech-Acts

So the preacher begins the hermeneutical task by entering into the everyday experiential world of the congregation. From this contextual sphere the preacher moves into the textual sphere. The preacher has to study a particular biblical text for a sermon. “In the hermeneutic process preachers should constantly transpose themselves from the world of the congregation to the world of the text, and then back to the present-day world of the congregation” (Pieterse 2001, 19). Continually moving between the text and the context, the preacher tries to narrow the historical and socio-cultural gap that exists between the two. As the preacher tries to “dialectically relate the world of the text, with its message, to the world of the congregation members with their needs” (Pieterse 2001, 19), the text “takes over,” performing certain communicative actions. Pieterse explains:

If preacher spend enough time hermeneutically digesting the text for Sunday’s sermon, the text starts addressing them. It takes over, illuminating their entire existence. Sometimes it comforts, sometimes it criticizes, sometimes it calls to repentance, sometimes it teaches or points the way. And so on. When the text thus addresses us and does something to us, we can go out to preach that text as witnesses to our own experience. (2001, 20)

The dialectical, hermeneutical process results in a clear sense of what the text is doing. And the particular speech-act embodied in the biblical text must determine the kind of speech-act the sermon will embody. If the particular text seeks to comfort, for instance, then the goal of the sermon should be to bring comfort to the congregation. Pieterse provides a helpful explanation.

Once we have a clear mental picture of the text, we need to determine its tenor or intention, also known as its *scopus*. What does the text want to say in the sermon? Does it seek to comfort, call for commitment, criticize, encourage, inspire, call to repentance, or what? Once we have written down the message of the text, its tenor and intention, in one clear sentence, we should write down the goal of the sermon—what we want to achieve with it on that particular occasion. (2001, 20)

Thomas Long also sees understanding what the text is *doing* as the heart of the textual interpretation. The central aim of the preacher's interpretative task, according to Long, is "neither the plucking of an abstract idea from the text nor some nonconceptual aesthetic experience but, rather, the event of the text's actively shaping Christian identity" (1989b, 84). A biblical text makes a claim upon its modern readers.

Biblical texts may perform such diverse communicative or speech acts as commanding, praying, narrating, explaining, and arguing. And the things that biblical texts perform function to inform and form Christian identity. Texts perform actions or "*do* things by *saying* things in certain ways." "Every aspect of a biblical text—its concepts, its language, its literary form, its social and historical placement—works in concert to exert a claim upon each new set of faithful readers" (1989b, 84).

Long maintains that the kind of action a text performs should shape the kind of action a sermon seeks to perform. "Biblical texts *say* things that *do* things, and the sermon is to say and do those things too" (1989b, 84). Traditional homileticians have taught that the sermon should say what the text says, that is, its main idea. But, according to Long, "they were only half right because they

overlooked the fact that texts say what they say in order to cause something to happen. Content and intention are bound together, and no expression of textual impact is complete without them both” (1989b, 85). New contemporary homiletical theories tend to emphasize experiences over ideas. But, according to Long, they are half right as well, because they downplay the content by which texts evoke experiences.

### **4.3.3 Literary-Rhetorical Interpretation and Psalms**

At this point we want to consider Long’s position that “the literary form and dynamics of a biblical text can and should be important factors in the preacher’s navigation of the distance between text and sermon” (1989a, 11). Long’s basic idea is that preachers need to consider literary genres of biblical texts in developing sermons.

The literary genre and devices of the text do control how the preacher interprets the text and thus must also influence how the preacher develops the sermon. It is crucial for preachers to give attention to literary forms such as narrative, psalm, epistle and narrative “because these are precisely the aspects of biblical texts commonly washed out in the typical text-to-sermon process” (1989a, 12).

The preacher’s task also requires a serious consideration of the best way or ways of conveying what the text says and does. It requires extending “a portion of the text’s impact into a new communicational situation, that of contemporary hearers listening to the sermon” (1989a, 33). The homiletical practice is not to

explain or “replicate” what the text says and does but to “regenerate” for the contemporary hearer the impact of some *portion* or some *aspect* of the text.

There are many paths from text to sermon, many ways of allowing the literary-rhetorical dynamics of a biblical text to shape a sermonic form. To mention four text-to-sermon connections: the sermon may recreate the movement of the text; the sermon may regenerate the conflict in the text between opposing forces, lifestyles, or worldviews; the sermon may explore a central truth or idea embodied in the text; the sermon may recreate the emotional mood the text evokes (1989a, 128-134).

In interpreting a text, the preacher must carefully attend to its literary and rhetorical features. This is the approach Long takes in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, in which he analyzes psalms, proverbs, narratives, parables, and epistles in terms of “the literary features *in* the texts and the rhetorical dynamics which are likely to take place *in front of* the texts, that is, *between* text and reader” (1989a, 24). It is important to distinguish between the literary features of a biblical text and the rhetorical impact the text is intended to produce. Long explains:

The literary features are those elements of language and sequence that make the text what it is. The rhetorical dynamics are the effects that the literary features are intended to produce in a reader. Literary features are in the text; rhetorical dynamics, though caused by the text, are in the reader. A punch line is a literary feature of a written joke; the laughter caused by the punch line is a rhetorical dynamic. (1989a, 26)

Different literary genres are intended to produce different types of effects in the readers. So it is vitally important for the preacher, as interpreter of the Bible,

to identify and carefully study the particular literary genre and devices of a given text in order to understand what the text is intended to do.

Although Long's analysis covers five genres, we will confine our discussion to his treatment of psalms. In our discussion of literary and rhetorical aspects of the biblical psalms, we will also refer to Vos's *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, which deal with important hermeneutical and homiletical issues in the study of the psalms.

In terms of genre psalms are classified as liturgical poems. As poems biblical psalms follow the literary conventions of Hebrew poetry. The biblical psalms, however, are more than poems for they have been incorporated into the common life of the community of faith. As Long puts it, "psalms are not only poems, to be read and interpreted as just poems. They are poems which came to have repeated liturgical usage" (1989a, 45).

What this means for preachers is that they must be aware of how particular psalms have been experienced by their congregation (Long 1989a, 11). When we study Psalm 23, for example, we immediately realize that it has been read and experienced many times before. Sermons based on the text have to acknowledge the fact that "we have been this way many times before," that "there is something old and familiar at work" (1989a, 46). Such acknowledgement is part of preaching.

Our familiarity with certain psalms changes their rhetorical dynamics. As liturgical poems, psalms do more than what poetic devices employed allow them to do. "This fact of the psalms' liturgical character modifies and sharpens what

we can say about their rhetorical impact beyond that discerned through the realization that the psalms are poetry” (Long 1989a, 11). So in understanding the rhetorical intent of a particular psalm—that is, what it tries to do or achieve—the preacher must also have an understanding of the kinds of rhetorical effects that particular psalm has had on his listeners.

Now, in studying the poetic dimension of particular psalms for sermons, the preacher has to ask two essential and closely related hermeneutical questions. What is the rhetorical function of this particular poem? And, what particular poetic devices does the poem use to achieve its rhetorical effect? These questions require some basic knowledge of poetry in general and Hebrew poetry in particular. Long states that “poetry works to disrupt the customary ways in which we use language,” so as to change our thought and experience (1989a, 45). He explains:

Poetry stretches the ordinary uses of words, and places them into unfamiliar relationships with each other, thereby cutting fresh paths across the well-worn grooves of everyday language. Poems change what we think and feel not by piling up facts we did not know or by persuading us through arguments, but by making finely tuned adjustments at deep and critical places in our imaginations. (1989a, 45)

The rhetorical function of poetry is to influence how we perceive and experience the world around us. It disrupts our ordinary ways or patterns of thinking and experiencing so as to challenge us to see and feel things quite differently. As Long states, psalms as poems work their way into the reader’s imagination to create “a shift in the basic moral perception of the reader. Psalms operate at the level of the imagination, often swiveling the universe on the hinges

of a single image” (1989a, 47). Preachers thus must be prepared for the ways in which psalms seek to interact with their imagination. Moreover, they themselves need to use their sermons to interact with their audience’s perception.

#### **4.3.4 Style and Language of Poetry**

The preacher-interpreter’s important task, in studying a psalm for a sermon, is to carefully observe how certain poetic devices achieve certain effects.

“Paying careful attention to these linguistic strategies can reveal to the exegete not only how the psalm is doing its work, but also much about what the psalm is seeking to say and to do” (Long 1989a, 47).

One of the chief conventional devices in Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Parallelism indicates that the content of the subsequent line is somehow closely related to the content of the preceding line. The nature of the connection between the preceding and subsequent lines can vary. There are various types of parallelism but we will mention examples of synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallelism (Vos 2005, 33-34).

In synonymous parallelism the second line is similar in content to the first line. Here is an example from Psalm 147:1.

How good it is to sing praises to our God,  
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

In antithetic parallelism the second line contrasts the thought expressed in the first line. Psalm 15:4a uses this type of parallelism.

who despises a vile man  
but honors those who fear the Lord,

When synthetic or complementary parallelism is used, the second line completes the thought expressed in the first line. The following concluding line from Psalm 15:5b complements the content of the lines preceding it, including 15:4a above.

He who does these things  
will never be shaken.

The preacher must pay special attention to parallel expressions because they transport central ideas and images into the imagination of the interpreter. “The effect of parallelism on the reader is that those ideas and images begin to take on life in her or his imagination” (Long 1989a, 49-50).

Metaphors pervade psalms. Vos draws our attention to the central role of metaphorical language in poetry. Basically, it contributes to the texture of a poem and shapes its meaning. “Language,” Vos articulates, “has at its disposal various stylistic elements to express ideas. The primal root of poetry is sound. The primal stem is the imagery. Metaphors could be seen as peepholes through which we glimpse the meaning of a poem” (Vos 2005, 30). Metaphor is a powerful stylistic device. “Metaphors are explosive, hurling people towards new insights and blasting open new worlds” (Long 1989a, 49).

Vos uses Psalms 84:10-11a to illustrate how metaphors work and what they say and do (Vos 2005, 31-32).

For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.



I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.  
For the LORD God is a sun and shield;

The terms “the courts” and “tents” have their ordinary meanings, namely, what they usually refer to. In Psalm 84 the term “the courts” also has a metaphorical meaning, namely, God’s presence and glory. Likewise, the term “tents” is used here metaphorically, expressing the idea of transience. The metaphors of sun and shield are used to express God’s character. The nature metaphor expresses the ideas of light and life, while the military metaphor expresses the idea of protection. Readers of the psalm know that God is not identical to the sun or a shield. Because we know that God is transcendent, the terms “sun” and “shield” take up a metaphorical sense and work their way into our imagination.

#### **4.4 The Homiletical Process**

After the hermeneutical task, the preacher must begin the task of shaping a sermon that communicates the rhetorical intent of the text. The preacher as communicator must ask this key question: What may the sermon intended for my congregation say and do what the text says and does? (Long 1989a, 33). The purpose of asking this homiletical question is to bridge the text and the sermon.

##### **4.4.1 Regenerating Textual Impact**

“The sermon’s task,” Long claims, “is to extend a portion of the text’s impact into a new communicational situation, that of contemporary hearers listening to the sermon” (1989a, 33). He does not hold that the sermon has to replicate the

literary form and devices of the text. A central homiletical task is “not to replicate the text but to regenerate the impact of some portion of that text.” It is impractical to say and do everything the text says and does. This should not be the preacher’s goal. “Rather the preacher should attempt to say and do what a *portion* of the text *now* says and does for a new and unique set of people” (1989a, 33).

Long considers Psalm 1 to show how we can find a connection between a psalm and a sermon (1989a, 50-52). An examination of the poetic language of the text of Psalm 1 shows that the contrasting images of a tree and chaff are central to its message. The tree is planted and secure, but chaff is blown away and restless. These contrasting images express certain aspects of the contrasting lifestyles of the righteous and the wicked. The rhetorical effect of the contrasting images, Long explains, is “to create two contrasting spheres of activity in the awareness of the reader or hearer. One sphere is filled with frenetic, desperate, directionless motion which quickly fizzles out. The other sphere of activity is still, steady, calm, rich with the quiet and strong action of the wise person reflecting upon Torah” (1989a, 51).

A sermon that effectively communicates the message of Psalm 1 may not only explain the stark contrast between the righteous and the wicked but also recreate its experiential impact in the hearers (Long 1989a, 51). This requires a search for contemporary examples of the two forms of life. An effective sermon on Psalm 1 may thus depict a person whose mission is “to grasp, to search, to change, to adjust to the shifting winds of the prevailing *zeitgeist* before it is too

late” (Long 1989a, 51-52). A sermon on a psalm does not necessarily have to have a poetic structure. But it has to have a poetic force. It must seek to recreate the visual and emotional impact of the psalm in the hearers’ consciousness.

#### **4.4.2 Four Text-to-Sermon Patterns**

There are many paths from text to sermon. There are many possibilities for conveying the performative or communicative force of a biblical text by means of a sermon. As Long puts it, “every sermon should be ‘custom-made’” (1989a, 128). The creation of a sermon involves a search for the best form and the best language to recreate the original rhetorical impact of a biblical text in a new situation. Long explores four possible paths from text to sermon (1989a, 128-134).

1. *The movement of the text may shape the movement of the sermon.* The movement-to-movement pattern may well fit narrative texts. A biblical narrative usually unfolds a plot in a series of episodes. So one way to preach on a narrative text is to create a sermon that mirrors the sequence of the plot.

Long demonstrates how this may be done, using the story of Elijah and Baal’s priests (1 Kings 18:17-40) (1989a, 129-131). The story moves from (1) the accusation that Elijah troubles Israel to (2) the contest between the prophet and Baal’s priests; and then to (3) the failure of the priests; and finally to (4) God’s manifestation.

A sermon patterned after the story may open with (1) a description of how in our day Christians trouble the larger society, and then move to (2) an elucidation of rival positions that Christian community and the larger society take with respect to certain critical public issues.

As a third movement, the sermon may offer (3) a critical analysis of the weaknesses of the rival, secular positions. The sermon may then conclude by giving (4) an account of “those places in our own experiences in which the presence of the true and saving God is manifest and which prompt our awe and worship.”

2. *The conflict in the text may shape the conflict in the sermon.* Some biblical texts contain a conflict between two “opposing forces, ways of living, or visions of the world” and the preacher may choose to reshape this conflict in a contemporary form (Long 1989a, 132). We have already seen how such movement can be done with respect to Psalm 1, which presents a stark contrast between the life of the righteous and the life of the wicked.

The conflict-to-conflict pattern may be suitable for such texts as Matthew 7:24-27 and Galatians 5:19-26. The former text concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a vivid portrait of two contrasting responses to the ethical teaching of Jesus: doing or not doing the words of Jesus. The point of this text is that the teaching of Jesus must be taken in all seriousness. This point can be embodied in a sermon that presents two detailed contrasting examples from contemporary situation.

Galatians 5:19-26 gives two catalogue lists of vices and virtues to highlight the antinomy of the life controlled by “the flesh” and the life led by “the Spirit.” Instead of explaining in detail the items on the catalogues of vices and virtues, a sermon on the text may contrast contemporary examples of the egocentricity that underlies “the works of the flesh” with those of the orientation of selfless concern for others that underlies “the fruit of the Spirit.”

3. *The central insight of the text may shape the central insight of the sermon.* Some biblical texts do allow readers to gain new insights; and preachers may choose to preach a teaching sermon to communicate their insights.

Long uses the story of Joseph and the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25) to illustrate how this insight-to-insight movement can be accomplished (1989a, 133). One of the insights we may gain from the story is that Joseph’s idea of doing justice is transformed by the message of his dream. When he was determined to do the right thing, namely, to divorce Mary quietly, the Lord instructed him “to take Mary your wife,” revealing to him that “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” Joseph’s story tells us that being just sometimes requires us to be open to a new movement of the Spirit. Long’s explanation is instructive.

This is not all that the text does, but it does teach this truth, and a sermon on this text may well be a teaching sermon aimed at communicating this insight. Such a sermon may explore contemporary situations in which the church and Christian people are called upon to perform the right and just action. How do we decide what that action should be? Do we appeal to precedent as though we already know what the good should be, or do we prayerfully explore the tradition and open ourselves to a fresh movement of the Spirit, seeking to discern the will of God for this day and this situation? (1989a, 33)

4. *The mood of the text may shape the mood of the sermon.* In the case of some biblical texts the emotional mood is integral to their rhetorical impact. We encounter a powerful emotional force when we read certain psalms, prayers, hymns, or thanksgivings. To regenerate the mood of a biblical text, the sermon itself has to be a work of art. The language of the sermon has to produce some music. Vos articulates:

There is sheer beauty in the bringing together of certain sounds. The mouth is like a spinning wheel, weaving words into colorful threads of meaning. The homiletician's choice of language is crucial, as the wrong choices could give away his/her hesitation, tie him/her into knots, or the speech could come across entirely characterless and disjointed. (2005, 318)

Every sermon must reflect a careful choice of language; however, for a sermon that seeks to be an embodiment of the emotional force of a text, its aesthetical quality has to be exceptional. The preacher as communicator has to know how language evokes feelings. Most particularly, metaphorical language is effective in helping people feel the emotional impact of the text (Vos 2005, 319).

#### **4.4.3 From Text to Sermon: An Example**

We can have a better understanding of how a sermon may regenerate the impact of a text by observing Vos' own sermon on pilgrimage psalms (2005, 365-367). In the sermon Vos briefly explains Psalm 120:5-6 ("Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar! To long have I lived among those who hate peace.") by saying that it is "difficult to locate Meshech on a

map” and that “Meshech and Kedar have come to symbolize bleakness, intolerable conditions, exile and alienation.” The preacher then leads his audience to an experience of the distress of the psalmist, “a man of peace” living “among those who hate peace” (120:7).

We, as travelers, can identify with the psalmist who had to dwell in Meshech, the land of alienation, misery and loneliness. We have all experienced the harshness of life first-hand. We have all been mauled by life and we bear the scars. We have known anxiety, doubt, temptations, sorrow, conflict and death. We have tasted the sweetness of life, but are also familiar with the bitterness of Meshech.

These words have a rhythm, created partly by beginning each statement in a similar fashion (“We, as travelers, can identify.... We have all experienced.... We have all been mauled.... We have known.... We have tasted....”). The preacher uses words imaginatively (“mauled by life”) and to evoke feelings of distress and hurt (“we bear the scars”). The last statement captures, poetically, the totality or reality of human experience (“the sweetness of life” and “the bitterness of Meshech”).

Vos’ sermon moves on to a second station in the pilgrim’s journey, Psalm 121:1-2 (“I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”). Briefly commenting that the hills were the habitat for the utterly impotent gods, the preacher identifies four contemporary gods with “feet of clay.”

The sex god cannot reach all the pleasure-seekers in time. The god of success has so many supporters that he cannot satisfy everyone. The god of health has his hands full with AIDS. The cyber god has a hard time keeping up with human technological expertise. The gods

are tired. They would like to die, but we never leave them in peace.  
They cannot really help us.

These rhetorically rich and powerful words produce a rhythm, partly by beginning each of the first four statements with the title of a contemporary god. The threefold use of “cannot” also contributes to the rhythm, but more importantly it underscores the impotence of all those gods.

There are here hints of playfulness; irony and a sense of tragedy are certainly evident. But the dominant feelings the above statements evoke cannot be but feelings of sympathy (“The gods are tired.”) and of disappointment (“They cannot really help us.”). So the audience is ready to join the psalmist, who asks “Where does my help come from?” and then answers “My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”