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This material is excerpted from his book *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Judson Press, 1994). In the first section, excerpted from chapter one, Proctor provides his model for sermon preparation. In the second, he discusses the proposition of the sermon. In the final section he discusses what he calls the role of the “antitheses” in sermon preparation.

Ch. 1 **Getting Started: The Basics for Sermon Preparation**

As the preacher sits down to prepare a sermon, it should be assumed that prior to this moment there has been private prayer and reflection, faithful study of the text for the sermon, and a thorough examination of available scholarly commentaries on the text. Moreover, it may be assumed that from the text, or out of an experience related to the text, one consuming idea, one driving proposition, has possessed the mind and stirred the soul of the preacher.

Burdened with this one driving idea—this moving proposition that God has lifted up for delivery to the people in our customary setting and at the appointed hour—the preacher takes the next step of following an orderly, productive, tested procedure for giving that idea, that message, that word, that proposition the appropriate vehicle for delivery to the people. The sermon needs an outline, a chassis, a framework for this God-given word.

Each sermon has its own basic anatomy, its own structure or outline. The question before us is what that anatomy is and how it comes about. There is some structure to every sermon, no matter how amorphous or original it may appear to be. Even jellyfish have an anatomy, a structure, however obscure that morphology may appear to the untrained observer. And a serious preacher will be concerned about the anatomy of each sermon—its organization—because the sermon's structure will determine largely how well the message it bears will be conveyed. In other words, once we acknowledge that the sermon is customarily given in an institutionalized setting, with regularity and continuity, and once we recognize how different our setting is from the earliest sermons of John the Baptist, Simon Peter, and Paul, we then have to determine what the criteria are for success and effectiveness today.

When is preaching done well, and how best do we go about the preparation of the sermon? We should beware of anyone who presumes to have the final word on how to prepare a sermon. We should also beware of anyone who thinks that preaching cannot be discussed, cannot be criticized, or cannot be improved. Any exercise that is engaged in so widely and for so long among such diverse circumstances and with such varied levels of approval, appreciation, and

effectiveness begs to be examined. We should be able, in some sense, to say that preaching is done well or done poorly and to comment on how it could be improved.

It must be said, however, that any task that relies so heavily on subjective experience, esoteric knowledge and insight, and deeply personal and selective observations is difficult to compare or evaluate. So there will be wide margins of variation in what is thought of as good preaching and poor preaching.

When we think of the classic preachers of our time, with the most enviable reputations, the differences among them are amazing. The preachers who are remembered best and referred to most from previous eras differ greatly also. Styles of architecture, music, movie production, haute cuisine, and automobile design differ, but these topics are discussed and taught, realizing that even though individual interpretations and motifs will vary, the objective remains and criteria for success can be discussed.

Anyone who heard Ralph Sockman; Carlyle Marney; George Buttrick; Howard Thurman; Elton Trueblood; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Harry Emerson Fosdick; and Joseph Jackson would know how varied great preachers can be in style, content, and method of sermon building. Anyone today who hears Prathia Wynn, Ernest Campbell, Calvin Butts, William Coffin, William Watley, John Killinger, Otis Moss, John Bryant, H. Beecher Hicks, Leonard Sweet, Charles Booth, Wyatt Walker, David Buttrick, William Willimon, William A. Jones, Charles Smith, Fred Craddock, Gardner Taylor, Jeremiah Wright, William Wiseman, William Epps, or James Forbes appreciates their individual differences in preaching....

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1. Once a merchant with whom I was dealing asked me when I was going to preach on "Dry Bones." He had heard a "Dry Bones" sermon somewhere and found it "thrilling," and he wanted another. He thought that all of us had "canned" sermons that we could warm up anywhere, anytime, and serve them, and that everyone had a sermon in storage on "Dry Bones."

Many persons have simply never been blessed to be near a serious preacher who prepared relevant sermons for the audience present. Little wonder, then, that we have a lot of repairing to do to make preaching seem important to many congregants.

In my forty-five years of preaching to college audiences, with few exceptions I have seen campus congregations shrivel. Something tells me that some timid, irrelevant preaching has gone on. Young persons eighteen to twenty-five in America today are perhaps the prime target for creative, exploratory, persuasive preaching. Their questions abound, and they need help. And the preachers who come to them need to know who they are and where they are.

2. Next, it is not only important to know where the audience is physically, socially, and psychologically, but it is good to know where they are theologically, in religious knowledge *and understanding*. It may seem unkind to say it, but, I repeat, the preaching that we heard in my youth took almost no account of where we were theologically. Our preachers spoke of a devil, and we could never figure out how an all-knowing, all-powerful God could let a devil slip past. Where did this devil come from? And when they spoke of a fallen angel, we wondered, from where did that angel fall? We were studying about planets, and no one but the preacher spoke of a place called hell, and we wondered when he would explain it. He never explained demons that jumped about from persons to pigs and such. The transfer of first-century images and cosmology to our time was left to us, and we felt ignored. We wondered how or if a snake ever talked or why God, who

was so serious in making a complicated world, would introduce sin through a Hebrew-speaking snake. We were in one place, and the preacher was somewhere else. The question was whether anyone really cared.

An awful lot of *preaching* goes on, but is a lot of *reaching* going on? The preacher must know where the people are on such topics as God's nature, human sin and redemption, the person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and resurrection life. It may be that most sermons begin at the wrong place and move forward, leaving everyone behind.

When I taught a Bible class, I became well aware of the questions on the minds of the people. I knew where they were, and my preaching had to be sensitive to that. An awful lot of teaching had to be packed into each sermon. In order to help the people best, we need to know what theological conclusions they are carrying around in everyday life as well as when they are hospitalized, victimized by an electrical storm, or disabled with a cancer. What ethical principles do they take with them to work, to school, to the parents' meetings, to the voting booth, or to the dinner table? In other words, where should the sermon begin, and what can be taken for granted? This is serious business if preaching is going to be more than an act.

3. *After learning who the people are and where they are, the next question is, What should the word for them be on this day, in this place?* It is here that the preacher must rely on the special call of God and prayerfully open up the channel to God, asking for the word that should be delivered. This word comes as a major proposition, a one-sentence statement that embraces a salient truth for that audience at that time.

When that proposition, that theme, that word, that declarative sentence comes, it brings with it a kind of self-evident authority. It will have a resonance, a ring, a vibration that assures the preacher that it has the warrant to be preached. When I get it, it sounds comical; but I stand up and say, "That dog will hunt!" One simply has no business trying to make a sermon out of a non-idea. You can no more do that than you can sneak daybreak past a healthy rooster! It cannot be done.

Before any sermon goes anywhere the preacher must have focus and direction. Although the idea should be potent enough to be broken down into subtopics, a tangible, simple statement must be written down saying that *this is what I shall have said when I am finished!*

In approaching the task for sermon preparation, the fundamental obligation is to succeed—to be heard and believed. In one of the dialogues of Jesus with the scribes, several topics were raised about the essence of God's moral demands. At the close of this public confrontation, Mark 12:37 (KJV) records: "And the common people heard him gladly." This should be one mark of a sermon's success: that it reaches the hearers and does not fall on deaf ears. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, it is written (Matthew 7:29, KJV): "For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." This tells us that the sermon should be convincing—not neutral, flaccid, or insipid but muscular, compelling, and spoken with authority.

When the apostle Paul addressed the Christians in Corinth on the question of speaking in tongues, he emphasized the primacy of being understood. He wanted the church to be edified, and that required clarity on the part of the speakers. He emphasized this point, saying: "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself [or herself] to the battle?" (1 Corinthians 14:8, KJV). Therefore, the watermarks of a sermon are that it should be heard and received. As the trumpet must blow a certain sound, the sermon must speak with authority....

So, as the outline, the skeleton, of the sermon develops, there is the proposition lying

nearby on a file card or a piece of note paper, like a contract. From it a subject may be extracted early. And, the sermon outline proceeds thus:

Subject

Text

Introduction (Antithesis)

Transition (Thesis)

Relevant Question

Synthesis

1....

2....

3....

Students of philosophy will recognize this method as the dialect found in the writings of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). As is the case with most widely known ideas, they are traceable to many origins. This dialectical approach to the search for truth was also found in the writings of Empedocles in the fifth century B.C.E, in Aristotle's idea of the "golden mean," in the thought of Schelling and more explicitly in Fichte. I was attracted to it when I discovered it in the clarion preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick. The use of opposites in teaching was also common in the parables of Jesus, and the clarity and simplicity of his teachings are due largely to such an approach.

What follows is a specific example:

Subject: The Pursuit of Genuine Community

Proposition: There is really only one God and one human family, and God wants us to become one genuine community.

Antithesis: Here is presented the narration of the story of Ruth and Naomi and the condition that befell them. Naomi recognized differences in cultures, religion, and ethnic and tribal backgrounds, and had settled for separation from Ruth and Orpah after much common suffering and sharing. Separation is always an early option. Stay with the cultural norms. Keep the old walls of fear and hostility intact.

Thesis: Narrative continues. But Ruth saw beyond differences to the reality of one God and one human family. She was ready to transcend differences in favor of oneness under God. She pressed for community beyond their differences.

Relevant Question: Is such a community possible? Is it realistic? Is it attainable? Is there a basis for it?

Synthesis: The synthesis that follows contains responses to the relevant questions and is, in fact, the body of the sermon.

1. There is a biological, physical basis for one human family created by one God.
2. There is a moral basis for equality, justice, and mutual support. All things come from God.
3. There is a spiritual basis. Our destiny is to please God, and God is love, seeking the good of each other as God's children.

My younger brother began practicing medicine in a small city in North Carolina during the

years of very tense and ugly race relations, soon after school desegregation had begun. The black physicians in his town were being called out to the hospital to serve only those emergencies that involved poor people—mostly black—in violent situations, and with the likelihood of no insurance. The white doctors were not called for these cases but for those that seemed more likely to be able to pay. It was only one more of a catalog of the inequities of that day.

The black doctors protested, and the hospital began to assign physicians on an alphabetical basis. When my brother's name came up, it was for an accident on an interstate highway in which a pickup truck had struck a car. Eight poor whites were injured—poorly clad, wearing tattoos, chewing tobacco, cursing and swearing, and tangled up in two old-model vehicles with beer bottles strewn everywhere. They kept asking him, "Are you the only doctor we're going to get?"

I asked him how he handled it. He answered, "We all have our methods. Don't you have a method for writing a sermon? I have one for multiple accidents and group trauma—and for a cursing, swearing, resentful emergency-room population. I hasten from one to another with a nurse following me. I ask these questions as I approach each patient: Is the patient breathing? bleeding? conscious? Where does the patient hurt? One question after another, and the nurse knows what to do in response."

Method. Every competent operator has method. In preparing a sermon, the method presupposes that the preacher has been called to this labor and that the preacher's life is tuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that this method is not all that the preacher has. The method is certainly no substitute for prayer, for faithful Bible study, for a close walk with God, or for regular public and private worship.

On the other hand, preachers are heard to say that they have no method at all except to open their mouths and let God fill them. This is often a vain and arrogant rationalization for sloth and laziness. The people deserve more diligence and effort from their pastor. One may have no method because one has not been found yet. Let us hope that this method will prove to be at least one that is useful.

In the next chapters, we shall consider in greater detail descriptions of the proposition, the antithesis, the thesis, the relevant question, and the synthesis.

Chapter 2 **The Proposition and the Subject: Setting the Course**

The proposition of the sermon says what the sermon is all about. It is the most important part because it presents the main idea, the word that has come during communion with God in prayer. This proposition also reflects the preacher's spiritual journey, those experiences that somehow touch the strings of the heart as he or she walks slowly through the Book that is the principal record of the God-human encounter.

Not every idea is big enough, encompassing enough, celebrative enough, probes deeply enough into our internal arrangement of values and priorities, or close enough to the vibrations of eternity hovering over us to claim the people's time in the name of a sermon. If your local baseball team was eliminated from the playoffs, there is no sermon there; if someone criticized the way the pastor dressed, that does not make a sermon; the pastor's vacation—reports on the weather, the scenes of rivers, the search for lost passports, and the strange exotic foods encountered—may be interesting, but its themes probably do not probe deeply enough for a sermon proposition.

The proposition is a faith statement, not a newscast or a book review. It says something important about life that would hardly be said in any other setting or by anyone else less well-prepared spiritually or less well informed in the Scriptures. It is the message that God has inspired the preacher to deliver to God's people. This separates a sermon from any other kind of discourse.

The proposition is also a positive, affirmative statement. It is good news, the proclamation of what God can bring out of any situation or event. It is a sample of the preacher's total theology, an authentic "for instance" of the best answers that the preacher has found to life's persistent and ponderous questions, from which no one can escape. The preacher anticipates them by selecting themes, propositions, and subjects that respond to these questions. Any thoughtful person could present a list of the questions that sermons should answer, and surely any preacher who is prepared for the task should be familiar with such a list. Here are a few of such questions, each of which could spawn many others:

1. Is this universe a friendly place, or are we biochemical accidents merely surviving here?
2. Were we created with equal potential for good or evil, and why is evil so prevalent?
3. How and when will the world end, and what happens to humans when it does?
4. Did Jesus choose to go to the cross, or was his crucifixion preordained?
5. Are persons of all races and nations equal before God?
6. Are persons of both sexes equal before God?
7. Does God love homosexual persons?
8. Was Jesus God in human form?
9. Does God use history, nature, and the sciences to expose to us

- knowledge and revelation beyond the biblical record?
10. Are there absolute moral standards, or do we simply do the best we can with our weaknesses?
 11. Can human nature be changed and made to be more like Jesus?
 12. Does religious faith give peace and stability to life?
 13. Does God plan our lives for us, or is our freedom real?
 14. Is the time of our death already fixed?
 15. Do the books of the Bible agree, or do they speak to particular situations addressed by different authors?
 16. Are Christians bound by all Old Testament teachings or only those that are in accord with the teachings of Jesus?
 17. Is the Holy Spirit as active today as it was at Pentecost?
 18. Was Paul right about slavery, submission of women, and governments being ordained by God?
 19. Did God sanction all of the killing in the Old Testament?
 20. Does the Old Testament present a complete understanding of God or the best available at that time?
 21. Is the church more a product of the culture than of the Christian witness?
 22. Does God answer prayer?
 23. Can prayer heal diseases—partially, totally, or not at all?
 24. Does one have to worship in a church or even belong to a church to be a Christian?
 25. Is tithing the proper way to fund the budget of the church?
 26. Should churches be governed by democratic practices?
 27. Should churches be racially separate?
 28. Should churches seek to become one bod^y in Christ and
 29. Is democracy a Christian form of government?
 30. Should the state ever practice the death penalty?
 31. Should we be taxed to take care of persons who are unemployable?
 32. Should the government intervene to correct long-standing suffering or injustices?
 33. Should Christians get divorces?
 34. Should a Christian ever have an abortion?
 35. Should Christians allow euthanasia?
 36. Should Christians fight in any war and kill others for their country?
 37. Should there be prayer in public schools and at public, government-sponsored events?
 38. Can the Christian gospel altar society?
 39. Is it possible for a diverse, multiracial society ever to become a true community?
 40. Should we give away money or other goods that we may need?
 41. Is war ever a moral act?
 42. Are we supposed to convert the whole world to Christ?
 43. Can persons be saved who have never heard of Jesus?
 44. Are those Christians who bought and sold slaves forgiven?
 45. Are we supposed to love everyone?

46. Can we do anything to earn God's forgiveness?
47. Is heaven a physical location?
48. Will we know each other in death?
49. Is Jesus going to return in physical, personal form?
50. When and where will Jesus come?

Traditionally we have been taught to begin sermon preparation with "the words given in the Scriptures." This is still important and fundamental, but we are not relieved of the responsibilities of treating the selected Scripture hermeneutically: looking for its deepest, broadest meaning and interpreting it for life and living. The passage selected says something timeless and universal, and the preacher must search for that. This means using a good Bible commentary, like *The Interpreter's Bible*. It is fair to the people to use a commentary that honors and respects sound scholarship and not one that brings a biased point of view to the literature of the Bible. One may have whatever theological predisposition one chooses, but the work of laborious scholars who live with archaeological findings, difficult language study, and detailed historical research should not be shoved aside in favor of less careful scholarship and brash, ill-founded, prejudicial conclusions. God is not disturbed by high scholarship. There was a God here before the Bible, and God is still here after the canon has been closed. No votes of the church councils or loud rhetoric has altered God at all. God is the same, so we should never fear scholarship.

The Bible contains reports on live, historical situations involving real people. When Jesus was born, the persons in the birth narrative—Quirinius, Herod, Mary, Joseph, Anna, the man who owned the inn and the stable—were actually there and were not mythological characters. This was an occupied territory, and a puppet king named by Rome ruled over the Jewish people. The Bible, therefore, relates to real life situations because it comes from and draws on real life situations.

The preacher who understands this will be able to relate the Bible's account to a parallel situation today. A man in Jesus' day who was so prosperous that he had to build extra barns to hold his grain, and who rejoiced in his prosperity without thought of others who were hungry, looks very much like many persons today whose focus is on more for themselves and not on how to share their good fortune with those in need. As one reads about Elijah reaching a point of exhaustion and begging to die, it brings to mind the whole problem of moral and spiritual burnout; when Isaiah speaks of waiting on the Lord, and renewed strength, running without growing weary and walking without fainting, it reminds us of how God deals with burnout.

Any serious Bible study will yield propositions. The Bible was not given to preachers as a catalog of neat sermon texts. Indeed, neat sermon texts are there—but in the context of telling about the ongoing perennial, ceaseless God-human encounter, the divine initiative in quest of the soul of humankind. In the long recorded history of that pursuit, stretching over the centuries from Abraham coming out of Ur of the Chaldees to the New Jerusalem that John saw in his vision on the Lord's day, one will find much to preach about. If one comes to the study of the Bible prayerfully, clothed in the Holy Spirit and mindful of the special accountability of the preacher to God and God's people, propositions, preaching themes, the *word* for a particular service will be found.

Many preachers feel that a lectionary preaching schedule may be too confining, but experience with it proves something different. Even though certain passages are presented for specific Sundays, there are more than one, and each one is subject to many different approaches.

Furthermore, one should allow that the Spirit was guiding those who prepared the lectionary in the first place and that the total exercise is one on which God has breathed.

Any regularly scheduled Bible study may yield the same result. You may not be looking for a preaching idea at a given moment, but you may come across one on the page you are reading—an idea just looking for someone to preach it.

While studying Acts for a Bible class, I stumbled upon Agabus. And Agabus seemed to be waiting for someone to find him (Acts 11:28; 21:10). He was a relatively unknown servant of the early church who was willing to devote himself to uninviting, tedious tasks that would never be widely recognized. And yet those tasks were essential and critical to the ongoing of God's church in its beginning. The church needed an Agabus! So I felt this proposition, this word reaching for me: "There are many small, simple tasks that need to be done, and God calls some of us to find our greatness in the success of the total task rather than in our own recognition." And a sermon appeared out of the mist and the darkness.

Let us see how a sermon unfolds from this proposition:

Subject: Finding Greatness in Small Assignments

Introduction (Thesis): In the early church there were no fixed offices, and not every task was anticipated. Agabus found at least two assignments that were unassigned and took them on (Acts 11:28 and 21:10). He was willing to do small tasks. No rewards were expected except to see the community survive and continue its witness. (Notice that in this outline the thesis comes first. This is a matter of choice.)

Transition (Antithesis): We have almost destroyed the notion of such selfless service by passing out titles, honors, and rewards for all sorts of contributions. We have trivialized the whole concept of the stewardship of time and service. We have all learned to operate in self-serving ways. We have taught persons to look for immediate rewards and testimonials for every act of service, and this has practically destroyed the idea of serving for the sake of service.

Relevant Question: Can we recover the value of serving for the sake of the task itself—for the sake of Christ?

1. First, we must learn to appreciate the tasks that need to be performed but have been left undone.
2. Second, we must assess our God-given gifts and see how they match these needed tasks. All of us have special gifts.
3. Third, we must be obedient to our Savior in giving our lives that we might find them. Real greatness comes when we are servant of all.

I was aware of flashing lights when I ran across Agabus, and I suppose that God was using this word about Agabus for a purpose. Shortly thereafter I delivered the above sermon at a ministers' conference with hundreds present, and the number of those present who came to me and expressed appreciation was amazing. For one thing, few of them had ever heard of Agabus—yet *there he is* right there in Acts 11:28 and 21:10! It seems that we are trained to look for the Peters and Pauls, the Silases and Timothys, and to overlook the Agabuses. We do not have any Saint Agabus football team playing on Saturday television; we have probably never met anyone named Agabus Johnson or Agabus Ryan; no one has ever graduated from a Saint Agabus High School or lived on Agabus Road in Agabusville, Virginia!

Those preachers told me that the sermon brought them a sense of approval, for many of them served in small churches—some in three or four rural churches—with no secretaries, no voice mail, no retirement or health plans. They never get invited to speak at annual conferences or conventions. Yet they console families in their painful bereavement; they help mend families that

are splitting apart; they go looking for teenage runaways with broken-hearted single parents; they pick up drunken fathers at neighborhood bars to save them from embarrassment, crime, or injury; they help members and neighbors in filing taxes, settling estates, applying for loans, and making auto insurance claims. They are Agabuses all day, every day, and never get any applause, never get an award, and die without an honorary degree. Agabus! But we know that this is not the end, and that is what heaven is for—another place, another life, when we experience a purer fellowship with God, unstained by the whimsical and distorted reward system that operates among us in this human existence.

In this sample sermon outline on Agabus, note that the outline may not include the proposition as it is initially conceived. It expands the proposition into a thesis. The proposition gives birth to a subject, a theme. Then it calls forth an antithesis which explains why the sermon is being preached at all and why the proposition is relevant. Next comes the thesis, *the proposition expanded and developed!* Following the presentation of thesis and antithesis, either one going ahead of the other, in an introduction and a transition, the next step locks everything in place. It is the relevant question, the "So what?" And the answers to that question become the synthesis, the body of the sermon in two, three, or four points in logical order. The proposition is therefore the key to the entire development of the sermon.

The proposition may come to us in prayer or in corporate worship or in serving a cause that we really care to support. It may come to us as we scan the news of the day or read history or a biography or engage in a patient, empathetic conversation—wherever God is revealing truth and spiritual knowledge. God is alive today, just as God was alive before the Bible was ever written; strong propositions may therefore come from sources other than the Bible, though they will be consonant with biblical truths. Wherever the proposition comes from, it will surely relate to a parallel truth found in the Scriptures. A beautiful painting, a song, or a poem may lead us straight to a fresh understanding of a great proposition.

As we recall great sermons that we have heard or read, they stand out because we recall the theme, the idea, the driving point—the proposition that enveloped the whole sermon, the word that remained with us. This is the significance of settling on a proposition before the sermon begins. It sets the direction and the priority and saves us from confusing the listeners with other emphases, however worthwhile, that really should be saved for another sermon. All of us have heard sermons that were actually a mixture of several good notions that were never developed sufficiently.

The proposition must be clear and of significant weight because it will be expanded, and further along in the outline

it will be enlarged and become the thesis of the sermon. So we need to ask ourselves, Is this idea worth a twenty-five minute development? Can it claim that much time? Can more be said about it than one sentence?

We all can remember some compelling sermons that we heard in seminary, in college, at our home church, from a visitor in our present church, from the pastor, in a convention, or on the radio or television. And some of those driving ideas have stayed with us. Here are some of those driving ideas listed according to theological categories. Your own list may be even longer. What are some of the sermon themes that have stayed with you? Here are some of mine:

Propositions Concerning God

1. God gave us the best possible of all worlds, and everything in it storms, germs, floods, sickness, and pain have a purpose and a spiritual meaning.
2. God is present in human affairs and seeks to bring something redemptive out of

every situation.

3. God is revealed to us in many ways in nature, history, music, art, logic, and reason, but God is ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.
4. The resurrection of Jesus is God's supernatural response (to the consummate evil in the world, as seen in Judas, Peter, Pilate, Ananias, Caiaphas, Herod, and indifferent Roman power).

Each of the above propositions can carry the full weight of a sermon. Each is ready for a strong antithesis to be used to illumine its strength and true witness. In the next chapter we shall see such antitheses addressing these propositions. There is more to be said about God, of course, but these are examples of sermon propositions that have stood out for me....

Chapter 3

The Antithesis: The Condition the Sermon Addresses

Usually the sermon is delivered in twenty to thirty minutes, bracketed within a sixty-to ninety-minute worship service, predetermined by the prevailing perception of the normal human attention span. This is not a long time to draw persons away from their previously computerized mental programs; their preoccupations; their anxieties, fears, and pain; the latest news; that last domestic brawl; or the echo of that latest crisis at work, in school, or even at the last church meeting. Hardly are these worshipers presenting to the preacher on a Sunday morning a clean mental slate, *a tabula rasa*. No, their minds are humming when they sit down. And when the preacher rises, the first task is to shift their focus from whatever their minds may be entertaining and turn them toward the sermon. The assumption is that the sermon is good for them and is worthy of their attention.²

We assume that the preacher has a strong proposition, plus a Scripture passage, ready to be preached as witness to the word for the day. The next task is to involve the congregation. This is the work of the introduction, where the preacher can introduce the antithesis to the whole message. The preacher needs this as much as the congregation in order to give the sermon integrity. What makes this sermon important? The answer to that question comprises the antithesis, which is presented in the introduction.

Let us go back to Joanna in Luke 8:3, the wife of Herod's steward, out there following Jesus. From this we intend to focus on the importance, the necessity of being different. The introduction must prepare the people for this topic. They did not wake up on Sunday morning thinking about being different. Only the preacher came with that in mind. It is the preacher's task to put it in the minds of the listeners. It is done by showing them what a waste it is when everyone goes with the flow. Anyone with teenage children knows the power of peer influence, how teenagers feel compelled to stay in step—wearing the same clothes, using the same colloquialisms and slang, styling their hair in the same way, conforming to the same moral values and religious ideas. We all become "sheep-minded." This is the *antithesis*, which helps prepare the congregation for the proposition that will appear later and be expanded in the transition in the form of a thesis. For example:

Proposition

Subject

Introduction (Antithesis)

The antithesis goes on: Joanna must have considered how safe it would be to be quiet, to think of her husband's job with Herod, stay with her "insider" friends, and leave Jesus alone. How many potential disciples have done just that? This is dealt with in the introduction (the antithesis). Joanna could have remained comfortable, safe, and secure as Chuza's wife. (Chuza was close to the power structure in Palestine.)

This antithesis succeeds when it prepares the listener for Joanna to make her move, to tell Chuza that she has to follow Jesus. The antithesis must bring the whole church to see what it must have taken for Joanna to make that move.

In the next chapter, when we study the thesis, we will return to Joanna and enlarge the proposition, which is expanded into the thesis. It becomes the transition section of the sermon.

The antithesis may be brief and the sermon may hasten to the thesis in a few short minutes. The antithesis that explains Joanna's situation, however, demands more space because we recognize a great number of people who want to stay with the "in" crowd and not dare to be different. Many persons have good ideas, talent, and creativity, and could help us with some of society's vexing problems, but they are timid about breaking ranks with their friends who conform to the status *quo*. *Dare to Be Different!* What a great subject! The rights of women have been won by those who dared to be different. Joanna could not stand it any longer. Everything she heard about Jesus made her want to break free and follow him.

One can tell if the sermon's proposition is really strong by the quality of the antithesis that it evokes. If the proposition does not deal with a salient theme, the antithesis will be dull and insipid. If the proposition says nothing, the response to it in the antithesis will say even less.

Let us look at another proposition, the one about David in 2 Samuel 9:1-3a. The proposition is that when we come into our own and taste success, we ought to look back and consider what our debts are. This is a refinement of our spiritual life: to thank those who helped us. Likewise, we should want to forgive those who impeded us, ridding our hearts of vengeance and vindictiveness. David had a complicated relationship with Saul. He owed his beginning to Saul's sponsorship, but Saul's jealousy allowed him to hate David with a passion. Meanwhile, Saul's son, Jonathan, and David were close friends, and despite Saul's behavior, Jonathan showed intense loyalty to David. When David was at the pinnacle of success, he remembered Jonathan and wanted to do something for one of Saul's heirs for Jonathan's sake. He wanted to take care of some unfinished business. So he learned of a crippled young man who was a son of Jonathan. He must have had a hard time moving about because he was crippled in both feet. Chances are that he moved by swinging a few feet at a time on a tall pole.

Word came to David that he was around, and David sent for him. What a scene in the palace when Jonathan's crippled son put down his pole and fell on his knees before David and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8, RSV). Referring to himself as a dead dog implied that he was not only lame in both feet but otherwise an outcast, a street dweller. And David gave him a permanent home in the palace, and the young man with the crippled feet always dined at the king's table.

That passage and that proposition evoke a strong antithesis. We like the name of Jesus—but his ways, his style, his behavior are really not popular with us. Considering the way Saul treated David, it is a wonder that David ever gave a thought to anyone kin to Saul. We like vengeance. We do not simply get mad; we get even! We carry grudges from one generation to the next. The greatest pollution problem is unforgiven and unconfessed hatred, grudges, and animosity. This is the antithesis, the reason for the sermon.

The recent conflict in Serbia is a playback of some 1914 tensions that caused World War I. The long and tedious struggle for peace in the Middle East is the long-term consequence of battles that took place over the centuries, from the first century through the seventh, with the rise of Islam through the Crusades. It is so tempting to maintain a posture of resentment and contempt rather than to stand tall in the strength of Christ; embrace a forgiving, grateful, and reconciling spirit; and take the initiative to begin again. We need this sermon on Jonathan's son and David. We

need it at the United Nations, in the Senate, in Jerusalem, in Baghdad, in Damascus, in Berlin, in Dublin and Belfast, in Somalia, in South Africa, and in New York City and Los Angeles.

When the antithesis is well presented, it prepares the minds of the listeners for the proposition to be expanded into a full-blown thesis. This is the sermon's *transition*. In some cases the transition will be a better place for the antithesis, and the thesis will be better presented in the introduction. It does not matter, as long as the interest and attention of the listeners are stirred. For example, the following sample outlines show how they can be inverted so as to evoke best the listeners' attention:

1. *Subject ..*
Text...
Introduction: (Thesis)
Transition: (Antithesis)
Or:
2. *Subject ..*
Text...
Introduction: (Antithesis)
Transition: (Thesis)

Ordinarily it seems more effective to capture attention by describing the condition, the situation, the circumstance that caused the proposition (the thesis) to be thought of in the first place. As a matter of fact, we often come to the proposition after observing a negative situation that needs to be addressed. It would not take much for us to think of a long list of conditions that would lead to strong propositions and become the antithesis in the sermon. In order to put such a list together—to have a box with file cards that represented fifty issues waiting for a sermon—one would have to establish categories that reflect theological concerns and ethical concerns—social, economic, psychological, spiritual, and political issues. Other categorical divisions might be personal, family, community, national, international, or universal issues. Such a spectrum is needed to avoid staying in areas where one reads and thinks most of the time. We have to be dragged away from our favorite topics and made to see things whole. Here is where some great preaching is called for—some waiting antitheses....

Notes

1. William Cowper, "O For a Closer Walk with God," 1772.
2. Isaac Watts, "When I Survey," 1707.
3. David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1987)
4. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).
5. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., *Social Crisis Preaching* (Macon, Ga.: ME University Press, 1984).
6. Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Go* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981).