

O. Wesley Allen, Jr. *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. 84 pages. \$12.00

If you've been looking for a concise introduction to sermon forms, look no further. In *Determining the Form*, O. Wesley Allen provides valuable guidance on sermon structures that will appeal to beginning students, seasoned preachers, and teachers of homiletics. Editor of the "Elements of Preaching" series, of which this book is one volume, Allen clearly understands the task of the series: "To help professors and students of preaching – including established preachers who want to develop their skills in specific areas" (ix).

An experienced preacher and teacher of New Testament and Homiletics, Allen knows that preaching's content (the what) cannot be separated from its form (the how). What we proclaim (the gospel) is always integrally related to how we proclaim it. Yet, over time, preachers can become trapped in forms that deaden the proclamation of the gospel. Hence, the need for a succinct text that introduces a variety of sermon forms and demonstrates how these forms can shape a specific sermon for a specific congregation.

In Chapter 1, with a brevity that avoids oversimplification, Allen introduces readers to the history of the three point sermon in the "university sermons" of the Franciscans and Dominicans, and the expository, "plain style," preaching of the Puritans. Then he carries us into the flourishing of preaching forms that grew out of the New Homiletic of the 1970s-80s.

In Chapter 2, Allen reminds us that all sermons share the essential qualities of "unity, movement, and climax," regardless of the form of a sermon. In our cultural context, *unity* (focus) in preaching is essential. While some may disagree with Allen's claim, he makes it clearly: "A sermon today needs to say one thing, say it slowly, and say it well" (8); that is if we want our preaching to be "life giving and transformative" for the hearers and congregation. With a nod toward Fred Craddock, Allen then says that good sermons provide *movement*, a journey, for the listeners. A sermon has to go somewhere. If the hearer is left behind on the journey, or is jostled to and fro while making the trip, they may decide it was not such a good idea to jump aboard in the first place. Finally, the sermon provides a *climax*, a clear proclamation of the good news for the given situation in a way that helps the hearers know what to "think, feel, and do at the close of the sermon" (11).

In the succeeding chapters, Allen demonstrates how representative sermon forms can be adapted to a given text, topic, or theological theme. These include propositional forms, exegetical-interpretation-application, verse by verse sermons, the four pages sermon, valley sermons, new hearing sermons, and negative to positive sermons. With helpful diagrams, Allen crisply explains each form then evaluates its strengths and weaknesses both theologically and practically.

A real strength of Allen's approach is the use of a single pericope, 1 Kings 19:1-15a, to demonstrate the application of the distinctive forms for preaching. In each chapter, he shows how a sermon based upon 1 Kings 19 could be structured along the lines of the given form. Preachers will find this immensely helpful and may even be tempted to adapt Allen's insightful interpretation of the passage and form for their own Sunday sermon.

One modest concern arises out of this well-crafted text. Allen points out that many new sermon forms, especially those influenced by the works of Paul Scott Wilson (four pages) and Eugene Lowry (the Lowry Loop), move from "scratch to itch," or problem to solution. While an effective way to structure movement in sermons, this approach can potentially ensnare the preacher in a law to gospel approach to preaching. But, theologically speaking, this is not

always desirable. Must every sermon start with a problem, a scratch, or a question? Sometimes preaching can be a steady song of praise (all gospel) with modulations for emphasis. At other times there is simply lament, nothing more, because the tomb is sealed. Allen himself names this potential difficulty (51). But the basic structure underlies all of the newer sermon forms that he presents. Readers could have benefited from seeing contemporary examples of preaching forms that do not “hinge” upon problem and solution.

This is a minor quibble with an otherwise remarkably succinct, theologically insightful, and rhetorically helpful addition to the literature of homiletics. Coupled with the other fine volumes in the “Elements of Preaching” series, this book should be a mainstay of the introductory class on preaching and a welcomed refresher for the busy pastor who hungers for a renewed appreciation of sermon structure and content.

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