



# Words

## A biblical balance between style and message

by Dr. Dwayne Morris

Wedded with

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The conflict between substance and style in preaching seems ongoing. Some contemporary authors argue for content, subject matter, and biblical accuracy while others contend for storytelling, metaphor, and images. Can our concern for clear expositional preaching be balanced with the desire to package sermons effectively? How do we maintain equilibrium between content and style? Preaching should certainly be biblical, hermeneutically accurate, and theologically correct, while acknowledging that the Spirit empowers the Word—but what about style? Looking to Scripture for the balance of style and content is the right place to start because the Word of God furnishes multiple examples of both message and medium that are worth replicating. In a sense, God has “metaphored” us. He has blessed us with figurative language useful for preaching.

### Persuasion in the New Testament Era Includes Style

The New Testament call to preach includes the use of style. Paul often

refers to his preaching using the various forms of ἀγγέλλω with κηρύσσω synonymously. In Acts 26 Agrippa recognizes that Paul has not simply given a defense of his actions; he has preached the gospel in such a way as to convert Agrippa to Christ. Agrippa describes this preaching as persuasion (πείθω, v. 28). κηρύσσω and πείθω connect unavoidably: preaching is persuasion. According to Larsen, several New Testament passages manifest Paul’s commitment to persuasion, using πείθω in persuasive contexts.<sup>1</sup> Paul was reared in a rhetorical community—a community well-versed in Hebrew and Hellenistic rhetoric. Hansen writes,

Numerous comparisons of Paul’s letters and the rhetorical handbooks of his day demonstrate that Paul employed the art of Hellenistic rhetoric to present his arguments. The extent of correspondence is too great to think otherwise. . . . Since the classical rhetoricians were thorough in their observation and organization of almost every feature



of argumentation, it should not be surprising that many of the features of Pauline argumentation are described in their handbooks.<sup>2</sup>

Paul employs poetic flourishes in passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 and Romans 11, as well as images from athletic to military. He understood the common letter-writing expectations of his era and adapted to the situation. Paul's tone, vocabulary, and syntax in Acts 17 on Mars' Hill manifest his Hellenistic background.<sup>3</sup> A less formal, personal tone and word choice are found in private letters, such as Philemon. Romans, on the other hand, contains formal and forensic argumentation, and Galatians' stinging indictment contrasts with Philippians' familial advice.<sup>4</sup> Paul was a child of his era, and his preaching reflected this rich

gold-covered acacia wood. The lid of this sacred box represents God's seated residence; two cherubs made of solid gold at the ends face the surface and with their wings cover God's mercy seat (v. 20). Why gold? Why acacia wood? While answers vary based on one's theological perspective, God apparently used this artistic box to communicate to His people the idea of being special, set apart, uncommon, and holy.

God's love of art is tied perhaps most significantly to His person. Art is a way of pointing out differences and highlighting the unique. This box was like no other, and in some ways it demonstrated to Israel that their God was like no other. God, therefore, not only designed the box, He provided special guidance to ensure that Bezaleel, His craftsman, would meet His specifications: "And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship" (Ex. 31:3-5).

Not all Christian craftsmen receive special guidance for their work. Yet Bezaleel did not create art simply for art's sake, nor was he filled with the Spirit while disengaging his mind. These expressions were crafted in knowledge, wisdom, and judgment to give glory to God, to teach lessons, and to represent His person. Art that is informed and shaped by biblical rationale, that represents God's character, and that exalts His name appears to be the kind of art God loves. Sculpting and architecture are not the only possibilities for godly art. King

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knowledge of Old Testament images and contemporary Hellenistic persuasive practices. Paul viewed his charge to preach (κηρύσσω) as persuasion (πείθω), and the Hellenistic approach to persuasion in Paul's day included style.

### **Art Can Glorify God**

**G**od loves art, especially art that glorifies Him and artistic language that is used to magnify His beautiful name. Exodus 25 describes the construction of God's tabernacle. The most prominent piece of furniture is the ark of the covenant, made of beautiful,



David was both poet and musician (2 Sam. 23:1-2). God's Word includes skills such as speech ("A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver," Prov. 25:11) and sewing ("And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty. And thou shalt speak unto all that are wise hearted, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments to consecrate him that he may minister unto me in the priest's office," Ex. 28:2-3).

We call artistic language "style," and it occurs throughout Scripture. The lion, bear, and snake in Amos, for example, startle readers to consider the day of the Lord (5:19-20). The allegories of the locusts and the fire are meant to terrify the listener concerning Judgment Day (7:1-6), and who is not amused by Amos's reference to the rich and carnal women of his day—the cows of Bashan (4:1)? Just as prophets preached in the world of images, so Jesus exhibits similar characteristics. Matthew 5-7 begins with those memorable beatitudes that contain anaphora, parallelism, and paradoxes unique within the theology of heaven. The salt, light, candle, and city on a hill are all images of influence. Jesus's parallelism, antithesis, and repetition weave together a masterful refutation against Rabbinic Judaism: "Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you." Shocking exaggeration—"if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off"—challenges listeners to deal seriously with sin and temptation. The poetic prose of the Lord's prayer underscores the hallowed nature of God's name. The final images of the wise man and the foolish man clarify the human response so effortlessly that children

gaily sing their truth. Jesus was not just a master of debate, nor just a master of storytelling. He was *the* master of the verbal art of style. As the eternal Son of God present on the occasion of the first-ever spoken words, Jesus more than anyone else understands the power of ideas set to language.

Delivery skills are also a factor of style. For example, Ezekiel used soft clay tiles in the shape of the city of Jerusa-

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### **Jesus . . . was *the* master of the verbal art of style.**

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lem to demonstrate how the city would be surrounded and besieged (4:1-3). In accordance with the Lord's command, Ezekiel lay down on one side of his body for 430 days to indicate the duration of captivity (4:4-8). He was directed to make minute portions of food and eat them as a way of symbolizing the rations during the captivity (4:9-15). He cut his hair (5:1-4), carried around meager belongings stealthily during the night (12:1-7), and openly boiled choice cuts of meat (24:1-14) to demonstrate God's accompanying verbal message.

### **Figurative Language Is a Gift from God**

Language is a viable medium of communicating ideas insofar as language reflects truth. Because God is an eternal trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it can be said that the members of the Trinity are in constant communication with each other. At least part of being made in the image of God, then, involves thinking and, by extension, the ability to



Communicate via language. Communication manifests the trinitarian nature of the Godhead. God made humanity in His image and did so in such a way that humans can and should enjoy a communicative relationship with Him and other people. Adam's first act appears to include rational communication in Genesis 2:19-20: "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam

manifesting not only the Garden curse upon all of humanity but also the powerful use of figurative language by God Himself.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

A knowledgeable use of style in preaching has the potential for increasing the clarity and impact of our message. Scripture reveals multiple examples of the creative use of style in content: style is included in Paul's persuasive preaching, in God-glorifying art, and in figurative language. God expects us to employ all of our abilities in His service, which must involve our use of language to communicate. The history of preaching gives us several examples of variety in preaching, such as Jonathan Edward's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" or R.G. Lee's "Pay-Day Someday." To fail at giving back to God the "answer of the tongue" is to fail at being a living sacrifice. God has "metaphored" us with figurative language to be used in preaching.

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### **What immediately separates humanity from the animal kingdom is depicted as rational thought and communication.**

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called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field." Adam named the animals; they did not name him.

What immediately separates humanity from the animal kingdom is depicted as rational thought and communication.

The biblical writers depict God Himself as using figurative language. When confronting Cain about his sacrifice, for example, God says, "And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him" (Gen. 4:6-7). "Lieth" means "crouching" and describes sin as "a wild beast, lurking at the door of the human heart, and eagerly desiring to devour his soul."<sup>5</sup> God's description of sin in figurative language was prophetic. Like a wild beast, sin pounced upon Cain, thus

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 134-135.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. Hansen, "Rhetorical Criticism." *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 822.

<sup>3</sup> Don Sunukjian, "The Preacher as Persuader." *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Don Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 289-299.

<sup>4</sup> Percy Cooper Sands, *Literary Genius of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1932) and D. F. Watson, *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*. JSNT Supplement 50 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989); reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 112.

<sup>6</sup> G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

*Dr. Dwayne Morris teaches homiletics and Life of Christ at Maranatha.*