

5-1-1988

# Homiletic: Moves and Structures

Eduard R. Riegert

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Riegert, Eduard R. (1988) "Homiletic: Moves and Structures," *Consensus*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol14/iss1/22>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

*Education For Peace*, which is addressed to students and professors in peace studies and comparative religion, as well as to those involved in studies and actions for the promotion of peace, takes seriously the global village and the pluralistic society in which we live. It challenges us to grow in our understanding of one another's religious and cultural heritages, and to do so through genuine dialogue. To fulfill the task of peace education, one must "educate one's pupils to embody in their everyday actions the peacemaking core of one's religious heritage".

This is a timely book. Its contents are provocative and challenging. But I believe that its real uniqueness lies in the fact that within the section on "Witnesses For Peace" the essays are written by scholars and practitioners from within— from within Judaism, from within Christianity, from within Islam, from within Hinduism, from within Buddhism. In each part of this text, the challenge to understand, to engage in dialogue and to become a "genuine peacemaker" is evident.

I can readily see this as a text in a university course on peace studies and comparative religion. I can also see its value in seminary courses, especially those dealing with contextual ministry. It is no longer adequate to be trained only in one's own faith; we must also seek to understand the faith of our neighbours, our fellow people. This is also a text that has value at the parish level, for personal study by the pastor, for use in adult study groups and particularly in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues. Because of its provocative nature, this is not an easy book to read; it also touches a host of theological issues and does so more implicitly than explicitly— a factor which makes it a natural for dialogue.

Arnold D. Weigel  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

## **Homiletic: Moves and Structures**

David Buttrick

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987

498 pp., U.S. \$24.95

This book could be named "The New Homiletic", for that is what it is. David Buttrick learned his homiletics from his Presbyterian father George and from Lutheran Paul Scherer; here he has established himself as one of the foremost North American homileticsians by setting himself the task of re-thinking the homiletical discipline. It is therefore a big book and weighty reading, and extremely important.

Buttrick's "text" is from St. Paul: "Faith comes from hearing". If so, he argues, "then we must strive to be heard". He observes that Plato

was appalled to discover that poets, when asked how they made poems, "were tongue-tied when it came to explaining themselves" (305). Buttrick suspects the same is true of preachers, especially in this age marked by space-age visions and revolutions and by "old-time free enterprise" and "old-time religion". What is and what is not being heard from the pulpit?

Two "engines" seem to power this work. The one is the conviction that "we are now moving out of an age in which rational objectivity was the order of the day in pulpit discourse" (55); the second is rhetoric: how do words work? how does language function?

With respect to the first engine. The standard communication model of "Sender-Message-Receiver" is the epitome of a rationalistic understanding of communication. Buttrick is convinced of its falseness: "The rationalistic notion, lurking in the communication model, that we have preformed thought which we can put into word containers for shipment to someone else's mind, is simply not true" (294). We've known for a long time that we learn least from words spoken, more from seeing, and most from doing; Buttrick draws on intensive reading in communication studies. "Research indicates," he states, "that in a reasonably good sermon, only about 35 percent of the language will be functional; the rest will have suffered instant erasure..." (211). Thus conceiving of the sermon as a series of propositional points (rational, objective truth) is disastrous. The old sermonic method of exegesis, interpretation, application—which turns Scripture into "eternal truths" immune from lived experience, and preaching into abstract argumentation and emotionalism—invites "instant erasure" and is expressive of bad theology. Worse, because such preaching is "talking about", it does not create faith.

So, then, the second engine, rhetoric. How does language function? Take a bare statement, "I carried my dog out for a walk this morning." The audience will instantly forget it unless the statement calls up images out of their own consciousness, that is, unless they image their own cocker spaniel, their own side door, etc., or the speaker images the event itself (27). Which is to say that "meaning" is never objective and rationalistic but is formed in consciousness out of the interplay of language and lived experience. To treat a sermon text in the "Then-Now" fashion is quite artificial, because, if the text is heard at all, whatever meaning it has for the hearer is already contemporary, having been already formed in consciousness (404). A biblicistic hermeneutic which treats the Bible as a repository of eternal truths thus perpetuates the subject-object split and forces excessive reliance on emotionalism and pietism for effectiveness.

The heart of Buttrick's sermonic method is the "move". A move (a deliberate attempt to get away from "points") is a "module of language" or "rhetorical unit" three or four minutes in length, designed "to form in consciousness... as a gestalt of modeling, imaging, affective attitudes, and concept" (28). A sermon is a sequence of moves. The development of moves begins when, after exegesis, a plot analysis (for narrative texts) or structure analysis (for non-narrative texts) is made in order to perceive the story line

or pattern of thought. An analysis of Mt. 2:1-12 would go like this: (1) Wisemen ask where? (2) Herod's reaction. (3) Information from priests and scribes. (4) Herod's instructions. (5) Wisemen worship and offer gifts (307). Underlying this plot of structure is a "field of theological meaning" (e.g., Messiah is promise and threat for he ushers in the new age of God; Messiah was killed; promise elicits worship). Thereupon analogies from our world of experience are to be drawn (e.g., wistful longing in "Where is he?"; Herod's political anxiety and contemporary political upheavals). Only now are we ready to plot a series of "move sentences", done not in "point form" but as if talking to someone (thus avoiding the "then-now" split), e.g.,

1. "Where is he?" asked the Wisemen. They belong in our world for they were looking for a Savior.
2. "Where is he?" asked Herod, but he wanted to kill. Entrenched power will always be threatened by God.
3. Well, guess who Herod turned to? To us religious people, that's who!
4. Well, eventually Christ was crucified.
5. But he rose again and still comes to us as threat and promise.
6. So how do we respond? We worship and we offer ourselves (311).

Each move sentence is then developed into a move by putting together theological understanding and lived experience. Each move "must form as a *single* understanding in communal consciousness" (50), and the entire sequence of moves will follow a logic common to human consciousness; that is, not a formal "point by point" logic but the logics that mark our human conversation. Thus moves will in fact *imitate* consciousness.

Preaching, then, is mediation: it mediates theological meaning to contemporary consciousness.

Buttrick has coined a new vocabulary: moves, structures, forming in consciousness, mode of immediacy, reflective mode, mode of praxis—not to mention awesome compounds such as God-with-us, being-saved community, faith-world, point-of-view. These are necessary if we are to break out of old patterns; they are also intimidating, especially in light of the astonishing range of research revealed in a 23 page small-print bibliographic essay! It is a relief to discover sections on introductions, conclusions, examples, and illustrations (enormously helpful!), as well as a superb "Brief Theology of Preaching" (ch. 26). And to be told again and again that many standard stylistic practices are doomed to instant erasure (e.g., "First", "Second") hurts, but also stimulates.

The organization of the book is problematic. Even a slow and careful reading spread over several days and devoted to little else leaves me struggling for comprehension. Buttrick is indifferent whether part one (Moves) or part two (Structures) is read first; I am not convinced that even the two-part distinction is significant. And the "Brief Theology of Preaching", while brilliant, feels tacked-on; nevertheless, it is perhaps the best place to begin reading. No doubt the whole plan of the book is designed to break us out of an objective approach even to Homiletics!

The most bothersome aspect of the book is the suspicion that, finally, all sermons preached in accordance with it will come out much the same.

Whether preaching in the mode of immediacy (narrative texts), the reflective mode (non-narrative texts), or the mode of praxis (relating experience to gospel rather than gospel to experience in that the beginning place is a human situation rather than a text), the otherwise extraordinarily helpful "move" tends to dominate, and this in spite of the fact that each move as well as the entire sermon can articulate various points-of-view.

This is a major re-expression of Homiletics based on current developments in hermeneutics, homiletics, phenomenology of language, literary criticism, communication, rhetoric, narrative and narrative theology, metaphor, style, and biblical studies. It will be the touchstone of further homiletical research and writing. Above all, it must become the partner of every serious preacher.

Eduard R. Riegert  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

**Lectionary Preaching Workbook, Series II: Cycle B**  
Perry H. Biddle, Jr.  
Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1987  
310 pp.

C.S.S. Publishing Co. devotes much or most of its energies to publishing preaching and worship resources, and many of its authors are pastors in parish ministry. Volumes of sermons on sections of the lectionary are plentifully represented in its catalogues, as are workbooks such as the one under review. Perry Biddle is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Old Hickory, Tennessee, and has been invited by C.S.S. to write a workbook on each of the three series of the Common Lectionary. This is the first.

Apart from its actual usefulness as a workbook, two features intrigued me. One is that the workbook comes highly recommended by some noted homileticians and writers: John Killinger; Don Wardlaw, F. Dean Lueking, and Wm. H. Willimon. The second and more compelling factor was the "promise" that he was using Buttrick's "move" approach (see my review of Buttrick's *Homiletic* above). Aha! I thought, I will see Buttrick "in action"!

Biddle is careful to emphasize that this is a *workbook*. He urges preachers to plan ahead in blocks of 13 weeks (one-fourth of a year), familiarizing themselves with the pericopes, selecting the texts for sermons and starting a file for each sermon. (Certainly it seems that more liturgically determined blocks of time would be better suited to the preacher's purpose than an arbitrary number of weeks.) More intensive planning occurs in two-week