E. Lowry: The Homiletical Plot Synopsis

Given twenty years or so between publications, the decision to simply re-issue *The Homiletical Plot* is appropriate because Lowry’s potent words need no adjustments beyond further reflective additions. Fred. B. Craddock is blatantly honest when he justifies this decision by clarifying how the book was truly ahead of its time and so the homiletical world of today can assess the book at greater grip. Lowry is responsible for sharing what it means to transform intuition into form that properly conveys the exact message that most every preacher of the faith seeks to capture and then attempt to articulate. Preachers who demonstrate the message of Christ through a means of piecing together parts of a whole or otherwise construct pieces in an organized fashion, fail to see the truth of Christ as what Lowry argues must be seen as an event-in-time…a narrative art form.

What sort of form is Lowry referring to then? He says a homiletical idea is first sensed by intuition then understood as alive and then perceived to take shape in a particular form of its own. Again, the homiletical, lifeless dilemma reveals itself when sermons are "properly" organized in segments in hopes of emerging as a whole. Lowry emphasizes this reality by comparing it to a carpenter who just continues to add braces to a continuously wobbly piece of work. Furthermore, a sermon is not a thing. The thoroughly parallel outline to a sermon that resembles a part-to-whole logic speaks of a thing with various parts, whereas the key to an event-like sermon is authentically, and intuitively fluid transitions. A sermon crafted by logical assemblage seems to bypass the idea and process of communicative interactions between the preacher and congregation. Thus it is a matter of developing a sermon versus constructing one.

As Eliseo Vivas facilitate, the truth of the gospel is indeed alive, and so the task of a preacher is to adequately capture its breath with language through reaching beyond consciousness. Lowry focuses on this process of sorts being a homiletical plot or story that simply moves due to an experienced bind of tension that therefore demands a resolution. The preacher engages in this drama with the
So, Lowry offers insight into how one might manage to participate in the tantalizing bind of a homiletical plot. He clarifies two preliminary stages: "wandering thoughtfulness" and "decision". The possible ideas that surround either imagination (hopefully not anxiety) supply the content for the decision that must be made by intuitively recognizing the captivating idea that genuinely sparks. When these sparks ignite, there comes the responsibility of leading this generative sermon idea into a realm of plot that can be perceived as a relational intersection between need and theme. Lowry declares this intersection must provoke an undeniably felt bind or else this sermon is quite dead!

Finally, the form of the homiletical plot is identified as born when the particulars of the human predicament and the particulars of the gospel authentically meet at what Lowry describes as a tension of itch with a newly relieving scratch. The point at which the sermon appears to develop a bind is where Lowry suggests the interesting, attention-grabbing, suspenseful moment desperate for resolve lies - the point of ambiguity. The key to a true ambiguous point depends on the life of the discrepancy that captures people at the terrible depth of their very real bind in this world - it is only at this place where the gospel of Jesus Christ can properly infuse. Lowry offers a sequence of events or stages in time where the homiletical plot can be tracked: 1) upsetting the equilibrium [Oops], 2) analyzing the discrepancy [Ugh], 3) disclosing the clue to resolution [Aha], 4) experiencing the gospel [Whee], 5) anticipating the consequences [Yeah].

Oops! It must be remembered and therefore unassuming that everyone meets to receive a sermon at the same position of truly desired reception. A primary facet to revealing ambiguity is to take hold of the responsibility to engage people at the vital and risky place where it exists so as to prepare to lead people into a place of peace. The importance of altering the balance of tension is to say that the introduction of ambiguity is the first step in a sermon simply because, as Lowry emphasizes, people
long to be carried on suspense so as to know the outcome. The resolution of the central ambiguity or bind acts as form for the homiletical plot that actually stands unopposed regardless the type of content within a sermon. Ambiguity is powerful, and thus powerfully demands an experience of closure. (It should be noted that this referred central ambiguity should not be mistaken as the only existing ambiguity encouraged). Also, Lowry strongly advises that not only should the plot resolution be disclosed before its time, ambiguity should also maintain direction. The equilibrium must be upset.

Ugh! The most fundamental question of all is the question of the human condition. The analysis of the illuminated discrepancy provides the shape for the sermon and therefore the form in which the gospel message can be developed. The primary path that the homiletical plot travels is the analysis or diagnosis acted out by asking the persistent question why. Lowry states that if this path is weak then that alone serves as the greatest weakness of an average sermon. Furthermore, he explains how, for example, this weak path is typically coated with description or illustration again as opposed to proper diagnosis. So, the missing depth or otherwise understood as unprobed discrepancy is given a counterfeit resolution of misdirected diagnosis most likely on a behavioral level (that when resolved tickles common sense) instead of a motivational level (that when resolved provides a deep explanation). Again, the key method of analysis centers on the persistently asked question-why.

The one who delivers the homiletical plot can best be trusted when they dirty their hands with the deeper complexities of arriving at a point where they can address the realm of motives. Also, Lowry encourages the necessary reminder that the sermon involves both preacher and congregation. It is crucial that the preacher share with the congregation, or better yet relive the wrestle that took place with the given issue. The raw wrestle, or rather the preciseness of the analysis determines the accurate and ultimately life changing experience of intersection with the gospel and the human condition. It should be noted that Lowry clearly suggests the impact I can have if the preacher incorporates behavioral diagnoses in the process of wrestling or analyzing so as to bring the people to a place of
revelation where they sense, what Lowry terms, as pleasurable foolishness alongside considerable relief that consequential position them in an experience of desiring to abandon superficial resolutions. This allows for the readiness for real, living resolution.

Aha! The missing link of redeeming resolution that is experienced and not simply known is encompassed in what Lowry refers to as the principle of reversal. On this notion Lowry gives two illustrations of poverty and oppression. Typically it is the immediate conclusion drawn that poor people are people because they are lazy, when it is not considered that people are lazy because they are poor. Furthermore, it is understood that people put others down because they are arrogant when in reality self-rejection provokes people to put others down. Lowry defines the first illustration as a cause-effect reversal, and the second illustration as an inverted cause reversal. Essentially, resolution comes only by reversing the common sense assumption. The deeper resolution can intuitively arise when the superficial resolution is rejected by means of not entertaining even the thought of probing at a behavioral level.

So, it is critical that the preacher cultivate and properly illuminate the superficially assumed resolutions to ultimately provide the people with an experience of feeling it lose its power and to then watch it break away. Paul certainly did this in Romans 2:6 -God "will render to every man according to hid works" to then turn around from the dead-end and say in Romans 3:28- "for we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law". The reversal is grace over law. Lowry describes the radical discontinuity of the gospel when compared to worldly wisdom; this is the underlying reversal-this gospel as inversion. Craddock summarizes this notion by said the Word of God is not interpreted rather it interprets. It should be noted that Lowry offers two other types of reversal: the inverted assumption reversal and the inverted logic reversal. When this previously missing link to resolution is revealed, the people are set to discover how exactly the gospel intersects the human condition.

Whee! To continue with the recent illustration of the oppressive personality, the real and living
resolution found at the intersection of the gospel and the human condition is not that we should stop rejecting ourselves but that we no longer have to reject ourselves because there is no further need to justify our existence in the face of God's unfailing love. The Word is clear and concrete when a people are best made ready at a time to receive it. The gospel can be effectively proclaimed when the way has been effectively prepared. Effective preparation is considerably more difficult than the magnetic pull of the Word that comes when it is given a place. In any case, the homilist does wisely not to meet the listener where they are at because too often they are in the wrong place. According to Lowry, now is the point where clearly the gospel has been received and the event has been experienced; but, where does that leave the homiletical plot?

Yeah! The critical matter that remains pertains to the new anticipations for the future. In the homiletical plot, the link to resolution does not officially solve the issue; it makes possible the solution. Lowry reflects on the traditional type of climactic point within the conclusion- the "call to commitment". However, Lowry exchanges this traditional stage with what he refers to as "anticipating the consequences". The resolution is meant to release the bound tension and set matters in place. The difference between these two types of concluding points is the implication that comes with the "call to commitment" in that the central focus places us in the decisive activity, when "anticipating the consequences" highlights God as the one who actively resolves the point at which the gospel and the human predicament collide.

Freedom is not a consequence of human capacity but rather of the grace of God. The release lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ in which He provides a means apart from evil into freedom of loving others as we do ourselves. The gospel as it is to be proclaimed does not concern itself with guilt, and it does not abstract itself from humanity in a way that offers simply a lecture- the gospel proclaimed is living message of redemption declaring what God has done, is doing, and will do.

Eugene Lowry offers some intriguing and as usual insightful comments unique to the re-issued
version of *The Homiletical Plot;* more specifically, plot stages and varieties. In regards to plot stages, Lowry submits that the sequential order (stages 1-5) does not necessarily occur in that order of movement every time, even biblically. Sometimes, stage 3, clue to resolution, happens immediately prior to or simultaneously with stage 4, experimenting the good news—vice versa. Interestingly enough, Lowry emphatically questions is labeling of stage 5 “anticipating the consequences” when “consequences” appears negative, so he would much rather label it now as “anticipates the future. Another slight adjustment of terms that Lowry reassessed is his use of the term reversal. He later challenge that term because, biblically speaking, it might not be a total reversal as much as it is a sudden shift. Lowry also found disagreement with the notion of the question-why. When the equilibrium is being upset, persistently asking why is but one way of analyzing the discrepancy; Lowry prefers the idea of engaging in complication as a more broad approach. So, whereas he identified the 5 stages as oops, ugh, aha, whee, and yeah, he later decided upon them as conflict, complication, sudden shift, good news, and unfolding. In Lowry’s re-issue of the book, he also concluded to not the different varieties one may take concerning narrative-like preaching. Initially, it is important to note the difference between story and narrative. Simply, a story can be a within a narrative, and yet a narrative does not have to include a story.

In any case, preachers such as Fred Craddock, H. Grady Davis, R.E.C. Browne, Edmund Steimle and then later David Randolph, David Buttrick, and others were a part of the new homiletical movement as was Eugene Lowry. Some varieties of preaching within this movement that may be classified as similar or within narrative-like style include inductive, episodal, phenomenological move sermons along with others. Needless to say, Lowry gracefully impacted the new homiletically movement in very unique way, so much so his return to re-issue his un-edited work is matter of wide acceptance from those familiar and those unfamiliar who have the opportunity to act as if it’s the first publication.