

## What Tom Long has taught me about preaching.

### 20 minutes on Tom Long: how do you make a 'long' story short?

Some of you might not know who Tom Long is: he will be 65 in October, comes from Georgia in the American South, where he teaches preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, he has also taught at Princeton Seminary and written a stack of books. (Including the textbook 'The Witness of Preaching'.) Michael Quicke describes Long as 'a very sane voice in U.S homiletics'.

1. **"Witness"** is a wonderful one word summary of Long's approach to preaching; he organises his whole approach to preaching around this biblical concept. **'Before a preacher says something a preacher must see something.** To be a preacher is to be called to be a witness, one who sees before speaking, one whose right to speak is created by what is seen. Sometimes pulpits are used as lecterns, but that is not what they really are. **A pulpit is not a lectern or a podium; it is a witness stand, and the preacher's task is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what is seen'.**

### Long talks about: 'The claim of the text' – what it is demanding of us?

'The claim of the text is very occasion specific; it is what we hear on this day, from this text, for these people, in these circumstances at this juncture in their lives'.

2. This of course says something about the importance of **Scripture** Long views the preaching of Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4 as a biblical sermon that is **normative for current practice; the yardstick by which all other preaching is measured.** This assumption is based on the sermon preached by Jesus in Luke 4, which has its roots in a biblical text from the Book of Isaiah. **'Preaching that involves significant engagement with a biblical text is the standard by which all other types of sermon are measured.'**

Long in his Foreword to Mike Graves' book *The Sermon as Symphony*: **'When the voltage drops in the Bible, preachers desperately plug the sermon into any outlet that promises a jolt of energy... Even some preachers who proclaim that they are "Bible preachers"...upon analysis turn out to preach sermons long on dogmatics and moralisms but innocent of any serious interaction with a biblical text.'**

Long is a model of a preacher *Living in the Text* – inhabiting its world.

3. This involves us in the process of asking **questions: Long has a lively, active, imaginative and inquisitive mind...**

**'The art of biblical exegesis, put simply, involves learning how to ask questions of a biblical text.'**  
**'Getting to know a biblical text is much like getting to know another person well.** We must be with them long enough, and attend to them carefully enough, to know not only who they are at the moment but also who they have been in the past and the vision towards which they are moving. We must ask them questions and tell them about our own life, but we must not do all the talking. We must listen to them unselfishly, cherishing their word even when it does not connect immediately to our own desires and interests. We must observe them in their many different situations, learning about their values and commitments as we see them in action. We must discover the patterns, customs, and even the habits around which they organise their lives. If we look at them and only see our own reflection, we do not know them. Only when we know who they are with us can we claim really to know them'.

**'If there is a secret to getting involved with God through the pages of Scripture, then perhaps it is this: *turn the pages slowly...***

An expected word can jar us onto a completely different track. Often when reading one portion of scripture, we run across words that echo another passage. Thus the biblical writers lead us superbly to make connections – between events in the text and likewise between events in our lives – that we had never previously imagined'. Davis

### 4. Which brings us to Long's concept of **Focus and Function**

**A focus statement** is a concise description of the central controlling, and unifying theme of the sermon. In short, this is what the whole sermon will be 'about.'

**A function statement** is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers.... The function statement names the hoped for change.

**'The idea that the biblical writers were not just trying to say something with words but also trying to do something opened up exciting avenues of textual understanding.** The writers of the Bible were no mere chroniclers; they were, in a way, preachers who chose and arranged language not only for its content but for its impact. Preachers must place the exegetical needle in the grooves of the text, track its movements and contours, and think about sermons as regenerations of the textual event'.

- **What is it saying? What is it doing?**
- **Will my sermon on this text say and do the same things?**

**5. Form** - For Long form is not neutral:

**'Form is an essential part of a sermon's content and can itself support or undermine the communication of the gospel.'**

**'The shape of the witness's sermon should fit the character of the testimony.'**

Here Long is building on the work of Karl Barth. Barth writing in his book *Homiletics* claims that **'Preaching must not be a welling up out of our own speech. In both form and content it must be an exposition of scripture.'** Barth talks about **'following the way of witness of the text'**. This would appear to be the heart of a biblical theology of preaching as **'witness,'** it reflects the idea that the preacher is echoing another voice. A great deal of homiletic thinking concentrates on helping the preacher find his or her voice, maybe the more appropriate task is to help the preacher find another voice in Scripture. **This voice is of course echoed in dozens of human voices that bring us the Scriptures.**

**Good preachers must first be good listeners.**

**Imagine that each biblical genre has a distinctive tone of voice.**

**(Long *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*)**

An example of the impact on my preaching is a series of sermons on the Book of Revelation. In this series I have attempted to reflect the powerful imagery of the text by preaching sermons that resemble a **verbal filmstrip**. In this way the message is crafted to mirror the frame by frame movement of the visions in John's apocalypse. Such an approach to apocalyptic literature helps the hearer to both understand what is said and feel its impact on the senses. In shaping this series I was talking a cue from Long's insights in his article *The Preacher and the Beast*. Long argues that preaching on apocalyptic material requires a reshaping of homiletic assumptions; rigid sermon forms will not be able to cope with the kind of material found in books like Revelation. Long treats the material in The Book of Revelation as, **'performative language'**; this was the clue I needed. I have found that attention to the genre of the text gives greater scope for communicating its message in a way that helps people experience its message in a full-orbed way.

**Whoever goes to the Bible in search of *what* to preach but does not linger long enough to learn *how* to preach has left its pages too soon. Craddock**

**6. Long has introduced me to a number of great friends: one of the best friends I have made from a preaching perspective is Augustine;** 1500 years stand between us but I have found his little book on Teaching Christianity one of the most helpful books I have read.

**'There are two things on which the interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt.'**

**Yet Augustine warns readers concerning an overemphasis on style: 'There is a danger of forgetting what one has to say while working out a clever way to say it.'**

**Teach, Delight and Persuade  
State, Illustrate and Apply  
Sermon on the Mount  
Example: Matthew 5:13-16**

My reflection on Long has stimulated me to move beyond seeing preaching as primarily **educational and informative** to seeing preaching as engaging the whole person in a transformative way. Such preaching seeks to touch all three bases of Augustine's 'teach, delight and persuade'.

**'A sermon that begins and ends with the Bible, he maintained is not a biblical sermon.'** One of Long's former students, Scott Black Johnson: **Long's sermons take you on a journey...Tom Long, I think is a great preacher...a fine exegete, and he's got an excellent sense of humour in the pulpit. He's a good describer. When you listen to Tom, the characters that populate the sermons are real – we know them.**

**'Preaching isn't reading a road map; it's taking people on a journey.'**  
**(Warren Wiersbe)**

*If you were there at the breakfast – you will notice that the best bits were unscripted, but this does give the flow of what was said – I really enjoyed coming! John*