

The Relevance of Biblical Genre for Preaching 8222.

The relevance of understanding Biblical genre for the preaching of the Word of God, with reference to How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, chapters 3-5 and 9-13, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

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## Synopsis

We present a definition of genre, and the purpose of preaching as echoing God's preaching. A recognition of genre forms a basis for sound exegesis, hermeneutics and homiletics, enabling the preacher with integrity to better represent God's Word as it was intended to the original hearers, and through them to us. We note that even individual words can change in meaning according to the genre, and then proceed to briefly examine some of the broad genres that Fee and Stuart identify, namely, epistle, narrative, law (legal), prophecy, psalm, wisdom and revelation (apocalyptic). We conclude that an understanding of genre avoids a wooden literalism, over-application of laws and exhortations which are no longer directly relevant, reading into texts current or future situations, allegory and spiritualising which were never intended, and presenting as promises and prescriptions texts which were meant to be descriptions and generalisations. In short such understanding provides guards against what the text cannot say and provides greater unity and consistency of valid interpretation.

John Barton affirming genre as the basis of literary competence, defines it as follows:-

“Any recognisable and distinguishable type of writing or speech - whether ‘literary’ in the complimentary sense of that word or merely utilitarian, like a business letter - which operates within certain conventions that are in principle (not necessarily in practice) state-able.”

The relevance of understanding biblical genre for preaching will largely depend on what we believe such preaching. Peter Adam, emphasising corporate edification, states that it is, “the explanation and application of the Word in the assembled congregation of Christ.” That may be too narrow a definition when we consider proclamation to unbelievers, but preaching to both audiences shares a common presupposition that the canonical Scriptures are God’s message, “to them” (the original writers, preachers and recipients), “for us,” to the extent that Adam affirms, “If the Bible is God preaching, then our preaching should echo and resonate with his preaching.” A second presupposition is that the text cannot mean something different for us than it did for “them.” In other words, to preach God’s message accurately requires a clear understanding of what God inspired the writers and preachers of text to mean originally. Inherent in the second presupposition is a third: that the message indeed still speaks to us.

This being so, using Scripture to say whatever we would like it to say may at worst encourage hearers to actions which are contrary to God’s purposes, and at best distort God’s inspired message. Even the argument that we can sometimes misuse the meaning of Scripture in one place to preach what is nevertheless true in another, is unnecessary, fundamentally dishonest, and may lead the hearers into the habit of faulty and misleading exegesis on the one hand, and disillusionment when the fault is discovered, on the other.

Graeme Goldworthy in his useful guide to understanding the Old Testament, illustrates the problem of ignoring the context with a Sunday School lesson in which David’s stones were all labelled with aspects of Christian living. Such application could have been made without any allegorical reference to any sort of literature whatsoever (the teacher could have used children’s blocks), but an observation that the David and Goliath story was of narrative genre may have enabled him to place it within the context of God’s deliverance of Israel, where God, and not David, was the hero, and the stones were incidental.

Even the understanding of individual words will vary according to the genre in which they occur. The word “lion” in Numbers 23:24 is, in the setting of a blessing, a simile for the fierceness of conquering Israel, in 24:9 a simile for God, and in the poetry of Psalm 7:1, a simile for the enemy. The poetical context of Psalm 91:13 encourages us to think of the lion as representative of those things which might generally endanger us, in the court narratives of Daniel 6 the lions are literal animals, while in the apocalyptic style of the following chapter, the lion denotes a frightening alien nation. Most interpreters and preachers will make these distinctions almost instinctively, but as Fee and Stuart point out, common sense is not always so common, and instinct can be easily distorted by our own cultural and denominational biases. Only a conscious awareness of genre will save the preacher from misinterpreting, especially in some of the more subtle distinctions between the range of literary devices found in the Bible.

Genre analysis is then a fundamental skill in the whole process of exegesis, hermeneutics and homiletics, for it enables us to discern the types of literature, better understand the meanings of words and phrases within both their literary and historical context, and thus more readily identify the original purpose of the text, and guard against inappropriate interpretations which would relegate the Word of God to the level (or lower) of any other literary work.

## Epistle

Fee and Stuart identify a number of different biblical genres. They begin with the Epistles and note the distinction between the predominantly public, and predominantly private letters, and the importance of their occasional nature. Observing these three points may enable the preacher to identify those exhortations and commands which were only likely to be binding on a particular person or group within their time and culture, and those which have ongoing and universal application. Further, the preacher should also see the individual chapters and verses in the overall context of a letter (usually read at one sitting) and against its historical background.

## Narrative

Old Testament narrative is similarly to be read against the background of its time and audience, and even more particularly as a complete story (in contrast to an atomistic approach), set in salvation history. Fee and Stuart label the story of redemption as the “top level”, while the story of Israel and that of individuals occupy the “middle” and “bottom” levels of reading. The preacher may draw positive and negative examples from the human participants, but the key player is always God. To neglect to emphasise his part and to demonstrate that the bottom and middle levels play a part in the top is to miss the key message from God himself and to fail to glorify him. The preacher will then try to tell whole stories, explaining the cultural differences and emphasising just one major point, while largely allowing the narratives to speak for themselves.

## Law

Law, primarily but by no means exclusively, Exodus 20 to Deuteronomy, constitutes a legal genre, falling into two major categories of civil and ritual law and with further recognition of apodictic and casuistic law. While the commands are important for the preacher to demonstrate the character of God in contrast with other ancient laws, humankind’s failure to meet with God’s standards, and the overall purpose for which law was given, they do not usually apply to us directly, unless they are re-affirmed under the New Covenant. Nor do all commands in the New Testament apply to us. We recognise the occasional nature of 2 Timothy 4:15 (“bring my cloak”) and Jesus’ instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10 (“Go nowhere among the Gentiles”), but also the ongoing and binding nature of the Ten Commandments since they are restated in Matthew 5:21-37 and John 7:23.

## Prophecy

While most preachers will easily recognise prophecy as those words spoken by identified prophets, the nature of the genre is more often misunderstood as predicting our own future rather than the immediate situation and future of the original listeners. Since the writings are often collections of oral pronouncements problems are encountered in identifying where one oracle ends and another begins, the occasion of the oracle, and its chronological placement amongst other oracles. Further complications arise from the poetic structure of the writings and, though Fee and Stuart do not mention this, the often unclear boundaries in Hebrew writing between poetry and prose.

However a recognition of oracle forms such as “lawsuit,” “woe” and “promise”, insight into the literary structures of parallelisms, and the realisation that the prophets reinforced the

Covenant laws, blessings and cursings to a nation as a whole, will save our contemporary preachers from applying the messages too specifically to individuals and from rendering the oracles almost irrelevant (while paradoxically attempting to make them relevant) by trying to identify them with our own unfolding political events. This is not to say that prophecy has nothing to say about our future, for the blending of former future events with eschatology presents a significant challenge to preachers, second only perhaps to the difficulties with *sensus plenior*.

### Psalm

As with poetical structure wherever it occurs (even embedded in other genre), it is important for the preacher to understand the nature, type, form and function of the Psalms, to avoid reading too much into the parallelism, applying the text so literally as to fail to recognise hyperbole, metaphor and simile, and misapplying or spiritualising psalms which may have had quite different purposes originally. Positively, they may be used as a guide to worship, and a demonstration of how we may relate honestly to God.

### Wisdom literature

Sound preaching of wisdom literature, in avoiding the pitfalls of atomising the text, may assist the congregation in making godly choices and seeing the part that God's Word plays in practical day to day situations. As many areas of Scripture do not necessarily recommend what they report, so with the speculative wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes we should understand much of the text as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Similarly, even within the areas of proverbial wisdom, its conclusions should often be preached as general observations rather than firm promises, and certainly not guarantees of a comfortable lifestyle.

### Apocalyptic

The book of Revelation is arguably the most prone to a variety of interpretations, giving rise to some unusual teachings across denominational and cultic boundaries, to the extent that it is often avoided entirely. The preacher's task is somewhat simplified by recognising the features of apocalyptic literature in fantastic dreams and visions, symbolism (particularly in the use of numbers) and a highly stylised form. The congregation will appreciate the literature more, when they understand the epistolary nature of this particular book addressed to the seven churches. By avoiding overwhelming them by too much detail the preacher may encourage them to see that God is at work both in preservation and judgement, that justice will be done, and that the saints are to persevere in the faith to the end.

An understanding of genre saves preachers from a wooden literalism, establishes ground-rules, which, while they may not provide all the answers, give a greater unity and consistency of valid interpretation, and delineate boundaries as to what the text cannot say.

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James Bailey, "Genre Analysis" in Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation, (Joel Green (Ed)), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 200, has a similar definition and points to the aspects of patternedness, social setting and rhetorical impact.

Peter Adam, Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching, (Leicester: IVP, 1996.) 70, 100, 97.

Adam, 99-101

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, (2nd Edn.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.) 19-20, 26, 64.

Fee & Stuart, 192-3.

Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984.) 10-11, 106-7.

Fee & Stuart, 26.

For the purposes of this study and within the chapters given we do not examine Acts, the Gospels and the Parables. The genres mentioned here are by way of example and Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard identify not only more examples and sub-categories, but also "embedded genres" in, Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, (Dallas: Word, 1993.) 259-374.

Fee & Stuart, 46-77.

Fee & Stuart, 78-80.

See Fee & Stuart's list, 83-4.

Encouraging the congregation to discuss the application could also be an enlightening exercise where the principles of interpretation can be emphasised by example.

Of more recent interest has been the debate on the way in which the Sabbath should be observed, while it is generally recognised that it need not correspond to the Jewish day. It is surprising that Fee and Stuart make no mention of the Sabbath in this chapter, 149-64.

Kenneth Bailey in lectures to the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle's Clergy School 5-7 May 1998, suggested that that all Hebrew writing is so stylised that the writers would not have recognised a separate "poetry" genre.

Fee & Stuart state that less than one percent actually deals with what are for us events to come. 166.

Fee & Stuart, 183-5. We regard this as an area requiring further debate.

Fee & Stuart, 204-5.

Fee & Stuart, 206-30.

In the case of Job's friends we would argue that they were conventionally and generally correct in their wisdom, but misapplied their conclusions to Job's particular circumstances. Therein lies a warning, and not just for preachers.

For example the statement, "Train children in the right way..." observes, rather than promises that usually, "... when old they will not stray." (Proverbs 22:6 NRSV).

Fee & Stuart, 231-45.