

The Selection of a Form
by Fred Craddock
Quoted from *Preaching*
(pp. 176-177)

It is the practice of some to choose from a stock of outlines a form for the sermon being prepared. This is to say that some preachers, when arriving at the point of asking, “How, then, shall I say this?” turn to a file of available forms and select one for that particular message. This procedure sounds rather arbitrary, to be sure, but there is nothing about it which rules out choosing forms that are both adequate and congenial to the message and to the experience to be generated by the sermon. To speak of *adequacy* of form is to imply that some are not, which is true. For example, the question and answer form, especially the objective type often found in a classroom, is not adequate to carry major theological freight, much less to create the experience of that theology.

To speak of *congeniality* of form is to imply that some are not, which is also true. A sermon with three points, for instance, would not be congenial to a message that intended to set the hearers before an “either/or” decision as in the “Choose this day whom you will serve” speech of Joshua (Josh. 24:14-15) or in the wide or narrow gates offered as alternatives in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13-14). Such a message would be blurred and confused by anything other than a twofold structure.

The method of selecting a form from a supply readily available, while unattractive in its arbitrariness and measure of artificiality, should not be dismissed lightly in advance of thought. One could do worse. Consider two positive features.

First, the forms of which we speak are and have been for centuries the common store of writers and public speakers. In other words, these structures have demonstrated repeatedly that they can carry the burden of truth with clarity, thoroughness, and interest, and therefore, have come to be regarded as standard. From such a supply of forms, many of us recognize and perhaps have used some of the following:

- What is it? What is it worth? How does one get it?
- Explore, explain, apply
- The problem, the solution
- What it is not, what it is
- Either/or
- Both/and
- Promise, fulfillment
- Ambiguity, fulfillment
- Major premise, minor premise, conclusion
- Not this, nor this, nor this, nor this, but this
- The flashback (from present to past to present)
- From the lesser, to the greater

No small amount of biblical, theological, and pastoral instruction, encouragement, and urging can be framed on these forms with a minimum of distortion, reduction, or dullness.