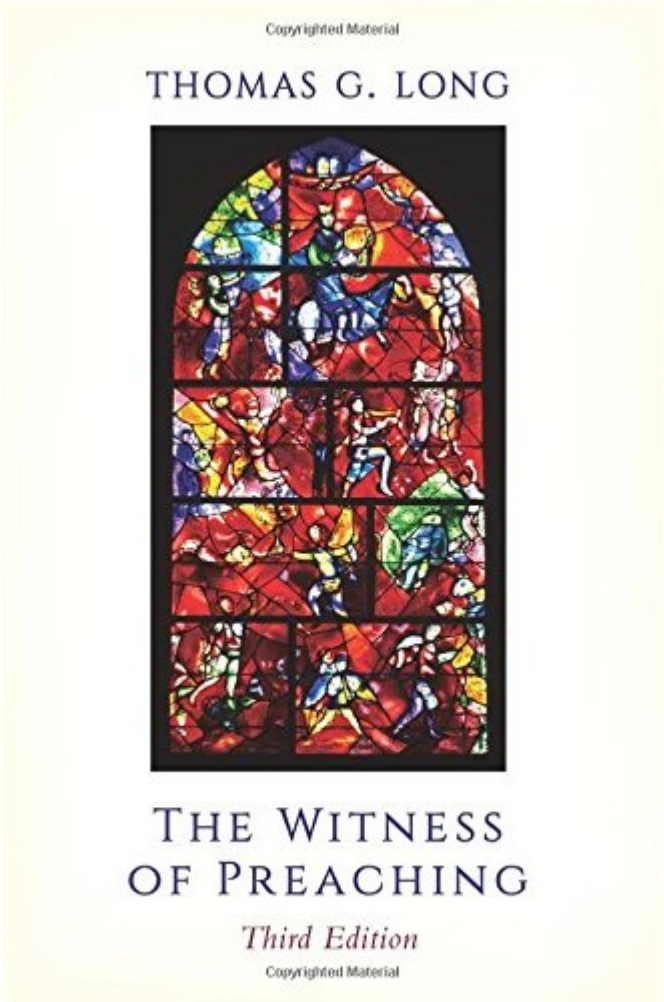
The Witness of Preaching after three decades

To teach preaching, I need the witness of Tom Long—and others, too.

by L. Roger Owens in the December 20, 2017 issue

In Review



The Witness of Preaching

Third Edition

Thomas G. Long
Westminster John Knox

It's hard to imagine a book over the past three decades that has shaped the preaching of mainline Protestant clergy more than Thomas Long's *The Witness of Preaching*. First published in 1989 and now in its third edition, it has sold 66,000 copies. I've owned several of those copies, first as a divinity school student, then as a graduate teaching assistant, and now as a seminary professor who requires the book for my classes.

I remember the first assignment in my introductory homiletics course as a seminary student. With the first edition of *The Witness of Preaching* as our textbook, we were asked to write several potential focus and function statements for a biblical pericope. According to Long, having clear, succinct statements naming what the sermon hopes to say—the focus—and what the sermon intends to do—the function—governs the preparation of the sermon. Only after clarifying these two tasks can the preacher shape a sermon and choose illustrative material. An integrated relationship between focus and function helps each sermon to have one (and only one) central message.

Long's emphasis on a sermon's having one central message comes from two places: the shifts in the field of homiletics at the time of the book's writing and Long's own guiding image of the preacher. He wrote *The Witness of Preaching* in the wake of the narrative turn in homiletics. In the late 1970s and 1980s, many homileticians began advocating for sermons that move with narrative suspense rather than deduce logical points. These narrative options included Fred Craddock's inductive approach, Eugene Lowry's idea of a homiletical plot, and David Buttrick's argument for the sermon as a series of moves. These approaches shared the conviction that a narrative sermon should progress toward a single destination.

While Long responded to these proposals appreciatively, his method was not beholden to any single one. How, after all, could he advocate a particular narrative form given his belief that the form should serve the sermon's central message?

Long's emphasis on one central message also arises from his preferred image of the preacher as witness. The preacher is on a journey. She begins in the congregation and shares its context. Informed by this context, the preacher turns to scripture, sent by the congregation "to search, to study, and to listen obediently on their

behalf.” This searching leads her to discern in the biblical text a word from the Lord—what Long calls the “claim of the text”: one focused word for the people in *this* context on *this* occasion. Then she turns back toward the community and bears witness to what she has seen.

I adopted Long’s approach. For years, I scribbled a focus statement on an index card and kept it on my desk all week as I wrote. The statement served as final arbiter, helping me craft each decision on my journey toward a sermon.

The second edition, published in 2005, was available when I started teaching homiletics. I assigned it in my first class. For this edition, Long made revisions to engage “many fresh issues and voices” that had entered the homiletical arena. In the 1990s, numerous books written by women raised questions regarding the relationships between gender, context, and preaching. It can’t be an accident that in Long’s second edition, the first chapter begins with an epigraph from Mary Catherine Hilkert’s *Naming Grace*, absent from the first edition. (In fact, in the first edition, chapter one, on the nature of preaching, has no women’s work footnoted at all.)

Long’s second edition explicitly accounts for the inclusion of women in homiletics. For example, early in the first edition Long claims that “to be a preacher is to be a midwife of the word.” In the second edition, Long includes at this point a lengthy quotation by Theresa Rickard offering a fuller sense of the role of a midwife. In his chapter on the nature of preaching, Long adds to the second edition Lucy Rose’s account of preaching as conversation. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Barbara Brown Taylor also appear as advocates of the preacher as artistic storyteller. These additions provide a fuller picture of the range of possible answers to the question, What does it mean to preach?

Long’s attention to the wider conversations in homiletics during the 16 years between the first and second editions did not shift the book’s overall guiding image or methods. But it made the second edition more useful as a textbook.

I first assigned the second edition to students who might not have fully appreciated the contributions of women to homiletics. I was teaching a class of Antiochian Orthodox priests, several of whom were from the Middle East. Their seminary training, they told me, gave scant attention to homiletics and certainly included no women teachers of preaching. Many of these students gave no thought to their homily until Sunday morning, a practice that was clear to me when I watched videos

of their sermons.

These students devoured Long's book. The idea that a preacher could offer a focused, concrete word to parishioners, here and now, a word arising from the preacher's interpretation of the text—this seemed like a secret *gnosis* too long hidden from them. I was their Prometheus, sharing wisdom stolen from the homiletical gods. When the class ended, they left with a sense of finally being able to compete with the Protestant churches around them. Icons, liturgy, *and* clear, focused preaching: it seemed a perfect trifecta.

My week with these priests as they made homiletical discoveries highlighted the heart of *The Witness of Preaching*: Long's image of the preacher as a witness who turns to the biblical text to discover a clear, focused word from the Lord for the people, then carefully considers what form the sermon should take to best say what it wants to say and do what it wants to do, before turning back to the congregation to preach. I saw this image come alive for students who had never seriously considered the what or the how of preaching.

Long has responded to diverse voices while maintaining his image of the preacher as witness.

Just weeks before the start of the spring term this year, I learned that a third edition had been published. My colleague and I changed our syllabus, requiring the new edition for our introductory course.

Two new features add to its usefulness. First, Long includes as appendices several sample sermons with commentaries, two of which he analyzes at length. Second, Long simplifies his process for determining a sermon's form. (The last time I taught the class, I remember thinking, *this process has too many steps—the students will never do this.*)

In the first two editions, Long's method involved breaking the sermon's central message into a number of discrete "tasks," gathering those tasks into larger "moves," and then ordering the moves to create the sermon's form. The difference between a task and a move was ambiguous, making it hard to complete the steps. The third edition eliminates the distinction between a task and a move, thus making the process clearer and more likely to be followed.

The third edition also responds to changes in the wider culture. “Preachers still hold forth in old country churches and neo-Gothic sanctuaries, but they are almost as likely to be found in taverns and movie theaters, storefronts and living rooms.” This recognition asks implicitly how preaching and the teaching of preaching should change in response.

One of those changes where I teach has been a significant increase in the racial diversity of our student body. The first year I co-taught the introduction to homiletics course, my colleague and I decided to require both the second edition of *The Witness of Preaching* and Henry Mitchell’s *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, in which Mitchell argues that the gifts of African American preaching should be available to preachers from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

While grading final papers in which students contrasted Long’s and Mitchell’s approaches, I read a paper that confirmed the wisdom of our choice. One student wrote of Mitchell’s book, “In my time at seminary, I have never felt more appreciated and welcomed as a black student in a required reading for class.” He critiqued Long for not making enough room for the affective dimensions of preaching, so important in the tradition that shaped him.

Long’s third edition goes some way toward addressing this criticism. Along with sermons by two women, he includes a sermon by Cleophus LaRue. Although some of LaRue’s work as a homiletician critiques Mitchell’s emphasis on celebration as the hallmark of black preaching, this sermon of LaRue’s ends with a celebratory “run.” Long, in his commentary on the sermon, notes that this run is a feature “especially in African American preaching” that contributes to the “affective appeal” of the sermon—the very dimension of preaching my student saw as lacking in the second edition.

LaRue’s work appears elsewhere in the third edition as well. He suggests that the narrative turn in homiletics shows how out of touch white homileticians were with the reality of preaching in black churches. While the narrative homileticians of the 1970s and ’80s argued that deductive, three-point sermons failed to engage listeners in the sermonic process, LaRue explains, this assessment did not apply to black preaching. Instead, he argues, many sermons by African American preachers begin by announcing the theme, taking their time with the sermon introduction, and then listing points related to the theme—breaking the rules of the new “white” homiletics but remaining effective sermons. Long agrees, writing, “In other traditions

and settings, however, such as the black church that LaRue describes . . . preaching may have had many problems, but boredom was not at the top of the list."

LaRue's broader point in the essay Long cites—a point which Long does not address—is that white homileticians often wrote about homiletics in general, giving little attention to and failing to learn from black preaching. Without acknowledging it, they were talking about white homiletics. LaRue writes elsewhere in that same essay, "While there is no shortage of laudatory remarks [by white homileticians] regarding black preaching the problem is that there is little or no substantive engagement of black preaching on behalf of those who speak so movingly of its potency and persuasive power."

Even with the most recent revisions, it would be a stretch to say that the third edition of *The Witness of Preaching* substantively engages African American homiletics. The authors whose works receive critical discussion remain the same: Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, Paul Scott Wilson, and David Buttrick—all white men. One might reasonably expect that homileticians like Henry Mitchell, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Teresa Fry Brown, Gardner Taylor, and James Earl Massey would also be considered necessary conversation partners. I wonder if the student mentioned above would see in this third edition the preaching tradition that shaped him affirmed as something worth learning from.

Another cultural change affecting the ecclesial landscape is the rise of digital technology. The third edition includes a new section titled "What about Sermons and Digital Technology?," an expanded version of an older section, "What about Using Film Clips, PowerPoint Presentations, and Other Visuals?" Three short paragraphs have become three pages in which Long acknowledges—with a tinge of regret, I believe—that the use of digital technology in preaching is here to stay. His advice will not surprise those familiar with his work. Since the spoken word is more powerful than the visual, Long thinks, less is often more when it comes to digital technology.

This technological revolution also compelled Long to include a new chapter addressing plagiarism, which teachers of preaching will appreciate. The Internet has made it much easier for preachers to find sermons of others. Some websites devote themselves to providing sermons for others to use. Recent high-profile cases of egregious plagiarism among prominent preachers means the question needs to be addressed at length: What are the rules of attribution in preaching? Long admits that the question is more complicated than in academic writing. For one thing, the ethics

of acknowledging sources varies culturally: originality is not as highly valued in some preaching cultures as in others.

Long's answer to the plagiarism dilemma is rooted in his image of the preacher as witness. There needs to be a "cord of trust binding together" the hearers and the preacher. Plagiarism is a breach of trust, breaking that cord and diminishing the effectiveness of the witness.

Furthermore, the preacher is tasked with offering a word for *these* people, here and now. "No borrowed sermon, however fine, can answer the question that cries out from every congregation, 'Is there a word today, a word for us, from the Lord?'" Cribbing the sermons of others is not only dishonest, it's a species of pastoral malpractice.

Long gives less attention to whether the ongoing cultural disestablishment of the church and the increasingly missionary situation of Christianity in North America merit any fundamental rethinking of the way we preach and teach preaching. I recently had a conversation with a pastor of a five-year-old congregation. Most of the members are people only recently acquainted with Christianity. "They just don't know the stories, the language, of scripture," the pastor told me. This description might be equally true of many long-term members in mainline congregations.

When many established congregations are struggling to find a new missional identity, and when mainline denominations are allocating more resources to starting new congregations, the field of homiletics could allow these issues to raise agenda-setting questions.

In the face of these changes, Long reiterates his reigning image. Someone must turn to the text, discern a word—a focused testimony for this time and place—and offer it to the congregation through a form that allows it to be received.

It's too much to ask for a textbook on preaching to address the deepest questions facing Christianity in the 21st century. It's enough for the book to become better with each revision, pedagogically more helpful and more faithful to representing the growing diversity in the field of homiletics over the past three decades. *The Witness of Preaching* does just this, which is why I'll continue to teach with it.

But it's not too much to ask those of us who write about and teach homiletics to allow the full diversity of homiletical traditions to bring the deep wisdom they

embody to bear upon the questions: What does it mean to preach, and how should preaching be taught, under the conditions of post-Christendom? Might there be new images to guide us through this uncertain terrain?

Read Thomas G. Long's response.

A version of this article appears in the December 20 print edition under the title "Testimony in changing times."