

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics' A Missing Ingredient in Today's Preaching

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## **A Neglected Aspect of Expository Preaching and Bible Teaching**

It has been a regular feature of my life that when I chat with a preacher after a church service and commend his sermon, he tells me how much he has benefited from writings on the Bible as literature. Almost always I listen in perplexity because in the sermon under discussion I could detect no evidence of handling the Bible in keeping with its literary nature. The literary approach to the Bible that seemed to be endorsed with such enthusiasm three decades ago has resulted in lip service, as conventional methods of handling the Bible have been misleadingly rechristened as a literary approach.

The literary approach to the Bible, and the importance of genre as a chief ingredient of such an approach, are subjects of neglect. This represents a missed opportunity of massive proportions, and missed opportunities are always sad. My encouragement in the rest of this article is to show that we can remedy a sad situation with just a modicum of commitment in the right direction. It is easier than we think.

## **Adjusting the Direction of the Ship**

We need to start our journey at the broadest possible level—not with specific genres but with the idea of the Bible as literature. Actually, this *is* an issue of genre, but in a somewhat disguised form. I remember what a moment of epiphany it was for me to read

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the title of the opening chapter of a book on literary genres. The chapter title was "Literature as a Genre." From the beginning of my scholarly career, I have operated on the premise that literature *en masse* has its own characterizing traits, but I had never thought of this as a genre.

In the conduct of our daily lives, we encounter two main types of writing or discourse. One is expository or informational discourse. The other is literary discourse. Eighty percent or more of the Bible falls into the category of literary discourse, but that is not how the Bible is characteristically handled and preached in our circles. Virtually every Bible teaching session and sermon treats Bible passages in exactly the same way, with no attention to the specific genre of a passage.

And what is this big, amorphous genre into which the entire Bible is placed? Let me answer that indirectly by citing the formula of a writer on the parables named Kenneth Bailey, who bequeathed to me a formula that I have used in my teaching and writing ever since I encountered it. Bailey wrote that a parable—and by extension any literary text—is not a delivery system for an idea. A delivery system for an idea: that is exactly how the Bible is characteristically handled.

By contrast, the chief subject of literature is not ideas but human experience, presented as concretely as possible so we can relive it in our imagination. My favorite text for proving this is the story of Cain. In the classroom, I stand before the board and ask the class to name recognizable human experiences in this ancient story—experiences such as harboring a grudge and attempted cover up a sibling conflict. The list runs to some twenty items.

To teach and preach the Bible in keeping with its literary nature requires us to identify the human experiences that are placed before us in the text. This takes time, but we can quickly develop a knack for doing it. The payoff is that the voice of authentic human experience will be sounded from the pulpit and Sunday school lectern. The Bible is more than a book of ideas, and the authors of the Bible acknowledged this when they gave us a literary Bible.

More can be said about what it means that the Bible is a predominantly literary book, but we will have made a good start if we accept that the subject matter of the literary parts of the Bible is universal, recognizable human experience. We do, indeed, need to end the journey by articulating the ideas that are implicit in a text, but if we have relived the text as fully as possible, the ideas can be quickly stated.

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## The Importance of Literary Genres for Understanding the Bible

In our book on expository preaching, Doug and I assume what I have just said about literature as a genre as a backdrop. With that as a context, we focus our attention on specific genres. A genre is a literary type or kind, such as satire and vision and love lyric. The total number of genres in the Bible is in the dozens.

The importance of genre for understanding a biblical text is first that every genre has its identifying elements. We cannot experience a text accurately without acknowledging them. A story consists of three primary elements—plot or action, setting, and character. It is impossible to interact with a story adequately without talking about these, yet a look at evangelical commentaries shows a nearly total absence of them.

In addition to possessing constituent ingredients, a genre has its corresponding modes of operation. I myself speak of specific genres as having their own ground rules. These ground rules should function as a set of expectations to guide our encounter with a text. We can transform our ability to show what is in a biblical text if we apply the right genre terminology and pay attention to how the terms operate in a given text. My appeal is to give it a try.

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a text without attention to genre.*

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We can relate this to the broader subject of expository preaching and Bible study. In recent years, expository preaching has run a parallel course to the literary approach to the Bible. In the 1990s, we seemed poised on the edge of a great flowering of expository preaching and literary analysis of the Bible. The promise remains unfulfilled. Expository preaching was more widely and effectively practiced two decades ago than it is today.

It may seem simplistic for me to assert that the neglect of the genres of the Bible is a leading cause of the eclipse of expository preaching, but let me make the case. Expository preaching is based on the premise that the first task of a preacher or Bible teacher is to relive or experience a text as fully as possible. In turn, such a reliving of the text requires that we do justice to its specificity. We cannot do justice to the specificity of a text without attention to genre.

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## Counting the Benefits

The first benefit of paying attention to the literary nature and specific genres of the Bible is that it will open the whole Bible to preaching and teaching. A preacher once confided that although he would often read a psalm to congregants in the hospital, he would never think of choosing a psalm for a sermon because he “didn't know what to do with it.” Armed with a knowledge of how literary genres work, we can know “what to do” with any passage in the Bible. We do not need to settle for most of the Bible being a closed book in our sermons and Sunday school classes and perhaps people's personal lives.

If we broaden the range of passages that we preach and teach, another benefit will accrue, namely, that the immense variety of material in the Bible will be evident. The unintended effect of treating every passage in the same way, and as belonging to a single genre, is that the Bible emerges as a monotonous book. Monotony readily computes to “boring.” One of the easiest ways to show that the Bible is an exciting book is to tap into its variety of genres.

These gains can be clinched if preachers and teachers will devote just one or two minutes to the inculcation of information about the genres of the Bible in their sermons and classes. Such inculcation consists of informing and reminding listeners of how metaphor works, or how satire (a major and unjustly ignored genre of the Bible) achieves its effects, or what the ground rules of visionary literature are. Everyone would quickly become adept at reading and teaching the Bible in keeping with its literary nature.

*Leland Ryken is co-author with Douglas Sean O'Donnell of [The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry and Genres of the Bible](#).*

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