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Inductive preaching: An interview with Fred B. Craddock

Derek Morris

Derek Morris: In the past two decades, you have championed the cause of inductive biblical preaching. What's behind such commitment?

Fred B. Craddock: The theological reasons have to do with the community and the Book, giving the listeners room to arrive at conclusions rather than concluding and then preaching on it. All Bible study that is good Bible study is inductive, so why not just do it that way in the pulpit? Some people don't like inductive methodology because it sounds like it doesn't have any authority to it. But it has more authority than deductive methodology. It's just that it is relocated between them and that Book.

DM: In your book, *As One Without Authority*, you suggest that if you do not allow your listeners to follow you in an inductive fashion, you have taken away their freedom to discover the truth.* What do you mean by that?

FBC: It means you leave your listeners in that pitiful box of having only two alter natives of agreeing or disagreeing with you. It is all your work. It is all packaged and delivered and that is it. So you get to say, "I agree with you," or "I don't agree with you." But in inductive preaching, you unroll your idea in such a way that listeners have to work to get it themselves. I think it is a compliment to preaching when listeners don't quite know whether they thought it themselves or got it from something the preacher said!

DM: So it's not as though you have nothing to say. Rather, you are trying to invite the community to come with you to the Book.

FBC: That's right! That's the way I was taught and the way I preached when I first started in the pulpit. I would give them my proposition at the beginning and then I would break it down into points. That was my sermon. Nobody asked me, "Where did you get that from?" I studied, I worked, but I started at the finish line. They were used to it so they didn't raise any questions. I was the one who raised the questions.

DM: It sounds like you came to the conclusion that you wanted to encourage the interaction to occur between your listeners and the Book. It was your desire to be a catalyst rather than a person who just stands up and explains or reports. Is there any danger with this inductive approach to biblical preaching?

FBC: Some young preachers have taken the inductive method as an excuse for getting up and saying nothing, just being casual. I have been embarrassed by going to seminars where somebody gets up and says, "Since I read Craddock's book, I don't really prepare anything. I just kind of toss out this and that." That gives me the shakes. I wanted to achieve just the opposite careful Bible study.

DM: You have suggested that the inductive process calls for incompleteness. How do you avoid frustrating or confusing your listeners? People want clarity and some definition, but you want to maintain a sense of anticipation. How do you determine your degree of incompleteness?

FBC: That is a good question and I can not give an easy answer! I would say that after preaching 8 out of 10 of my sermons, I go back and write notes to myself. "Went too far." "Didn't go far enough." If I am preaching to a group that is biblically alert and committed Christians, I can take them along an inductive path and I will shortly find them ahead of me and sitting on the porch waiting! Other groups say, "Go ahead, please tell us what you are trying to say so we can go on to the cafeteria!" So your question is pastoral as well as a theological and homiletical. You don't want to frustrate people; you don't want to ask ninety-nine questions and then sit down. If you ask more than one question, you are asking too many. You may ask that one question several ways, some of them quite leading, but keep your focus. Don't let your listeners just chase rabbits everywhere and then go home saying, "I don't know what in the world the preacher was talking about,"

DM: It would seem that with inductive preaching, it is especially important to recognize the non-verbal cues of your listeners. Somehow you have got to keep them right on the edge of discovery. How do you accomplish that?

FBC: Yes, as you preach you are reading the listeners. You are sometimes pausing and being casual, what I call "stopping and sitting on a bench a minute." You can tell as you are speaking if you are making progress. Sometimes you jump in too deep. They can't swim. Then what are you going to do? Going back is just as dangerous as going forward. I usually carry a plan B!

DM: If a pastor is wanting to explore the inductive method, what suggestions would you offer?

FBC: Most people who follow the inductive method are inductive up to a certain point. Then, near the end of the sermon, they start drawing some conclusions. It is something like an inductive opening and a deductive closing. And if I were just starting, that is the way I would start. In fact, I would make a practice of constructing my sermon to lead to that result.

DM: In other words, you would gently let your listeners know that you will be expecting more active participation from them when they listen to the sermon. Is that it?

FBC: Yes, that's right. It's expecting more of them, but you are not doing it all at once. They are learning to listen to you; you are learning to speak to them. When I started preaching inductively as the pastor of a church, people at the door would say, "Was that a sermon? That wasn't a sermon!" And I said, "Did you follow it?" "Well, some of it, but I didn't know what you were doing." So at a fellowship dinner, I told the people, "I expect more work out of you folks. Listening is hard work. I want you to draw some conclusions." We worked together and we had a lot of fun. I made a lot of mistakes, but gradually they developed the ability to think about what I was saying, to think their own thoughts and remember things. I learned a great deal.

DM: I notice that you have the ability to make your listeners laugh. You seem to establish rapport by looking at the humorous side of things.

FBC: Laughter does that. It makes a community when everybody laughs together. It is liberating for both you and your listeners. Seriousness of purpose does not require heaviness of mind. You can be light on your feet and still be very serious about what you are doing. In my early days, I used to defeat myself with a counterproductive heaviness. If you don't give your listeners an opportunity to relax and chuckle, they will find an opportunity. But they will do it at the wrong time, when you are trying to be serious. In other words, if you don't let them up for air, they will come up for air at the wrong time!

DM: I hear you saying that when you preach inductively, it's good to plan actually resting points for your listeners. What other suggestions would you give to those who want to improve their preaching?

FBC: I have learned that if you say something that is really true and wise, it is layered. Even children will get your point, but on a different level than the parents. People will come back and say, "You know, I have been thinking about that." Life is layered and I think truth is layered. When Jesus told the parables, I am sure some kids nudged each other but they didn't really get it like some others did. So that is the way I think we should preach. And finally, don't try to pack too much into a sermon. If you put too much on the plate, they can't eat it all. And when they see they can't eat it all, they may quit eating altogether. Just say one thing; say it a lot of different ways. Weave it in and out of the text. One idea is enough.

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