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Inductive/Deductive Preaching

Paradigms are changing everywhere today, even in preaching. So drastic is the change in preaching style that teachers of preaching talking about a “new homiletic.” Among other issues, the new homiletic is more inductive and the old homiletic is more deductive. Let’s contrast these two styles of preaching.

DEDUCTIVE PREACHING is what we have traditionally done. Deductive preaching begins with a general conclusion and then deduces certain points or exhortations from that conclusion.

INDUCTIVE PREACHING, in contrast, starts with the particulars of human experience and moves toward the conclusions of the gospel. As the sermon unfolds, the listeners become active participants, moving with the preacher toward the conclusion.

Deductive preaching goes from general to particular. Inductive preaching goes from particular to general. Deductive preaching offers the congregation propositions to apply to their lives. Inductive preaching invites the congregation to participate in a journey to a certain destination where they can make their own conclusions.

Fred Craddock, retired professor of preaching at Emory University in Atlanta, popularized the inductive method back in the sixties with his book, *As One Without Authority*. In more recent days, Eugene Lowry, author and teacher of preachers, has become a popular spokesman for the inductive method. His book, *The Homiletic Plot*, suggests that a sermon should be developed like a story, leading the listeners from a conflict to a discovery of how the gospel relieves that conflict and then finally to some applications to their lives.

The inductive method has some drawbacks.

For one thing, the authority in inductive preaching is not located within the preacher but is located in the interaction between the congregation and the biblical text. However, too much emphasis on human experience might relegate the Scripture to a place of secondary importance.

In addition, not all of Scripture is conducive to the inductive style. The Gospels with their stories are rich material for inductive preaching. Preaching inductively from the Ten Commandments or the epistles is more difficult. The danger in exclusively using the inductive style is that we might avoid some portions of the Scripture in our preaching menu.

But the inductive method also has some attractions.

For one thing, the inductive style enables the congregation to journey with us as we discover the conclusion together. In deductive preaching, we start our sermons with the truth discerned through our week of study, but we do not reveal the process by which we arrived at that truth. In contrast, the inductive style leads the congregation along the same path of discovery we traveled in our study.

In addition, the inductive style fits with the way most people communicate. A person does not walk up to us and say, “Let’s have a conversation. Here is what I believe and these are the propositions I deduce from that declaration.” Instead, we dialogue back and forth with each other from one idea to the next until eventually we arrive at a conclusion. Inductive preaching follows that approach.

Try the inductive style and see how it works for you. Read a sermon or a book on preaching by Fred Craddock or Eugene Lowry or Richard Eslinger. Dare to break out of your comfortable paradigm of preaching.