Preaching the Melodic Line – Dick Lucas

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Many musical compositions come back to a key melody time and time again. The sound track of many movies even feature a key melodic line that helps tell the story and carry emotional weight. In a similar way, books of the Bible have a "melodic line" that repeats, sharing the book's main idea and intended response.

There's no one more qualified to go deeper on the what, the why, and the how of preaching the melodic line than our preaching hero, Dick Lucas. Lucas, now retired, founded the Proclamation Trust to raise up the next generation of Bible expositors.

Listen below or read the transcript of the interview that originally ran on PreachingToday.com.

PreachingToday.com: What do you mean when you talk about preaching the melodic line of a text?

Dick Lucas: I didn't invent the term melodic line, but it's become quite well known. The melodic line is taken from the fact that a piece of music has a tune or a line going through it that holds the whole thing together. We want to show that in a New Testament letter, for example, a theme holds the whole thing together. Therefore, to take verses and passages out of the context of that melodic line, that theme, that argument that runs through the letter, would not be profitable.

For example, 2 Timothy 3:16 is often taken out to prove the inspiration of Scripture, which, of course, it does prove. But if you put it in the melodic line of the letter, you find it is Paul's instructions to Timothy as to how he is to continue his ministry, and Paul is saying the one equipment Timothy needs for his ministry is the Word of God, which will enable him and train him in righteousness and correction and all the rest of it. I know a principal of a theological college who is determined to bring everything in the curriculum under 2 Timothy 3:16. That is, he wants the Bible to control all the other disciplines. That's really what Paul is saying to Timothy. Although the verse does teach the inspiration of Scripture, and indeed without that the Scriptures would not be powerful to do the work, the verse is talking specifically to the person of God — to the minister, to the pastor, to the teacher — and telling him how he is to be fully equipped.

How does that principle work itself out in the preparation of a sermon?

Say I'm doing a series on the Epistle to Jude. It starts with that wonderful statement that we're kept by Christ, and it finishes with that wonderful doxology, "Unto him that is able to keep you from falling." If you look at the material in the middle of the Letter, the emphasis is on how we are to keep ourselves from disaster through obedience to the faith and to the standards God has laid down. There is a remarkable balance. God

keeps his people — we all know that. But the letter is saying it's not enough to know God keeps you. The sign that God is keeping his people is that they're keeping themselves. That gives me a grip on the Letter. It shows me what it's about, where it's going. There are some tricky and important verses in Jude I might spend a whole sermon on, but if I've got the pattern and argument of the Letter, it's going to make a good deal more sense.

When you preach on one section of a Book, do you still scan the entire Book to bring out this melodic line?

It's one of the most important disciplines of the preacher. It's alarming if you go to a church where a team of preachers is doing a series on Hebrews, for example, and each preacher has a different idea what the Book is about. It's absolutely essential to know the way the melodic line, the argument, the theme of the Book, is going.

What are some of the secrets you've found for finding the melodic line of a Book and for weaving that in and out of a sermon in a way that keeps people interested?

That is the hard work of preparation. It is exciting to find the reason why the Book was written. The difficulty is that the scholar, in writing his commentary — and of course they're essential for us as part of our work — inevitably will be a detail man. He will tell you what every word means, where it comes from; he'll tell you about every dot and comma. That's fine, but I also want to know why it's there; and that the commentators are not usually so good at, because their scholarly skills are honed for the technical matters.

If I wrote a letter to a friend saying I was catching a train and would meet him at Cambridge at three o'clock, and that letter was dug up in 2,000 years, the scholar would not be interested in why the letter was written. He would look at the details of the letter and write monographs on them. For example, in the letter I might have said I would call in at McDonalds on the way to Cambridge. The scholar would say, "This fellow 2,000 years ago must have been a Scotsman and had Scottish friends he called in on." Then somebody else with a Ph.D. would discover McDonalds was a café. All that is interesting, but it's not what the letter was written about. The letter was written to say, "Will you meet me at three o'clock?" So the letter of 2 Peter is written to warn me that I will be carried away from my stability unless I grow in the grace and knowledge of God. That governs the whole letter. So I need to know why he wrote the letter if I'm going to look at the details.

Do you generally find a key verse that tips you off, or is it repetition that cues you in on the key thought?

Sometimes it is a key verse. One of the verses we used recently was Hebrews 13:8. It's what I call a "kitchen calendar text": "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Few people have the foggiest idea what it actually means. But it's a key to Hebrews, because it is saying that Jesus Christ, in his work as a priest and in his

bringing the revelation of God, is remaining forever and ever. If the Queen of England remained forever and ever, Prince Charles would never be king. So if the priest stays forever and ever, there will never be another priest. That tells me that the theme of Hebrews has to do with the finished work of Christ on the cross and that there doesn't need to be another priest, because he's the priest forever and ever. If he's a priest forever and ever, that means he's finished his redemptive and reconciling work, and there's a final message the church has been given to which nothing can be added. Hebrews begins by saying God has spoken many times in the past, but he's spoken finally by his Son. If you put those two things together — the finished work and the final word — you have the message of Hebrews, but you're not likely to get that without going through the Book and saying, What's the argument running throughout it? The writer is saying: Don't slip away from this Word. Don't add to it, because the work of Christ as a priest has been finished and you are reconciled to God. If you're reconciled, then nobody can do anything to make you more reconciled and more acceptable.

How do we train people to have the mental discipline to follow a line of reasoning, to get into the text and see the big picture with us?

Most people prefer order and logic to muddle. We sometimes should say to the preacher, "Order! Order! Where are you going? What's your order?" Most people prefer the preacher to have some kind of order so they know which direction they're meant to be going. We call that "logic on fire." That comes from Martin Lloyd-Jones, who said the sermon should be known by its logic, but that logic must be on fire, so it's not just cold, academic logic.

The great sermon of Paul to the Athenians is exactly that: logic on fire. It has a clear line of teaching about their ignorance and why they are ignorant and what they ought to do about it. Some people like emotional muddle, but after a while they prefer to have their mind addressed and satisfied. It's like when we were kids. We liked all the wrong food, but as we grew up we preferred more nourishing food. As you grow up spiritually, you prefer something that nourishes your mind as well as your heart.

On Sunday I'm going to be preaching on the Ethiopian in Acts 8. One of the things we have to do when we come to a familiar story like that is to look at the structure the writer uses in telling the story. The writer has a hand in this and is telling the story with a point in view. Now you can use that story in a number of different ways. I read a book on personal evangelism based on the Ethiopian story, and that is legitimate. I've often kept that story up my sleeve when I've been asked at short notice to speak to businessmen, because it's a story of a businessman who met Christ. But neither of those reasons is the reason Luke tells the story. Luke tells the story because the church in Acts 8 is beginning to go out into the whole world. It's the time when the disciples are driven out of Jerusalem, first to Samaria and then to the outermost ends of the earth. So Acts 8 stands as the first chapter in that great expansion of the church out into the world. And Luke wants to tell us what is true evangelistic ministry.

Now I imagine Luke's study was pretty untidy, because he's got material coming in all the time of preaching, of campaigns, of wonderful things, of persecution and so on. But

he actually spends a whole chapter with two stories — Simon the magician, which is a false picture of ministry, and the Ethiopian and Philip, which is a true picture of ministry. So I want to know what he's got in his mind when he writes the story. He's wanting to say to me: Philip, led by the Spirit, is giving you a pattern of how to evangelize. The first point is that the Ethiopian says to him, "How can I understand this Book without a teacher?" Luke is saying the Bible is not self-explanatory, that God has appointed teachers. Then when I turn to the Pastoral Epistles, I discover only one professional qualification is needed to be a minister: he's got to be an apt teacher. So when I come back to the Ethiopian, I find it fascinating that the Holy Spirit sends Philip into the desert, into an evangelistic campaign that can't have been a very welcome invitation, where he meets one person reading a Bible he doesn't understand. The Ethiopian says to him, "Will you come up and guide me?" And the Greek word simply means "explain it," "teach it to me."

So Luke is telling me that evangelism starts at understanding the Scriptures and that evangelism is not collecting scalps; it's not getting people emotionally tied up, and it's not asking for a decision when people don't know what they're being asked to decide about. It starts with Bible teaching. It's immensely encouraging to a young minister who feels he ought to leave evangelism to the professionals when he's told, "If I teach the Bible, I'm beginning the evangelistic enterprise." That comes from looking at the structure of the story.

At Proclamation Trust we have a preaching principle called "Question Time." We take that from the passage in the synoptic Gospels where Christ is under fire with questions. He often asks a question in return. In fact, occasionally he says, "I won't answer your question until you answer mine: Where did John the Baptist get his authority from?" And they don't want to answer it, so he says he won't answer. What we learn is that the preacher is not there primarily to answer the questions people have; he's primarily there to present the questions God is asking us.

When I was ministering at universities, I used to be pushed up against the wall by students, and they used to batter me with questions. God was in the dock. The impression was that if I could tell them why God had made the world in such a rotten way, they might possibly presume to believe in him. That is a completely wrong way to go about Christian apologetics. God is not in the dock. It is we who are in the dock. My job as a preacher is to bring to people's attention the great questions God asks that they would never hear otherwise.

When I was preaching to yuppies in London, many of whom in their twenties were beginning to make a great deal of money, I asked them questions like, "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" I would simply put before them a profit-and-loss account and say, "I can gain the whole world. I can take over Harrods. I can take over the Bank of England. I can become a multimillionaire and then die and lose my soul and go to hell eternally. Where is the profit in that?" They never had anybody put that question to them before. That question which God asks us in Christ's words is infinitely more important than a question they might ask me, which is largely a result of their ignorance, because they've not sat under Bible teaching.

So in “Question Time” we’re trying to say the church ought to be on the front foot, not the back foot — not because we want to be proud or difficult, but because actually we are the people in the dock and God is the one who is asking the questions. The preacher needs to know his responsibility.

Take Psalm 2 It begins with that magnificent question: Why do the rulers and kings of the earth unite together and rage against the Lord and his anointed? That’s not a question anybody ever asks. The questions we ask and that are on our daily paper are: Why do the Palestinians and Jews fight against each other, and why can’t we stop them? That’s an important question. That’s not the question the Bible is asking. The Bible is asking: Why is the world fighting against God? “Well,” says Mr. Jones, listening to that, “I never knew it was.” We can then go on to the New Testament and show that we are all by nature not apathetic toward God but antagonistic. You and I didn’t learn that until the Holy Spirit began to teach us what an enemy we’ve got in our own hearts toward God. But you soon learn that as a pastor or a Christian worker, because you talk to people about Christian things and find an enormous hostility whenever the thing comes close to them. Psalm 2:1 raises that great question, which people would never otherwise hear.

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