

An Intercultural Homiletic: Preaching Amidst Cultures

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The North American church is waking up to cultural differences. Recent visitors to church come with a marked visible difference and may have a foreign accent. Our neighbors include those of various cultural backgrounds. In our post 9/11 world the reality of cultures impinge on us every time we turn on the television and especially as we travel by air or cross an international border. It is important to rethink ministry in terms of cultural diversity. This holds particularly true for preaching within worship that is often the largest and broadest venue in the church.

With the diversity between preacher and congregants, there is a need for an intercultural homiletic. We must take into account cultural differences in our preaching. Just as it is a travesty for a male preacher to disregard the females in his congregation by only making references that have primary pertinence to the male specie,¹ so it is inappropriate to preach without taking into account the cultural backgrounds in the congregation and backgrounds of those that exist beyond the four walls of the church. In fact homileticians need to become intercultural preachers.

I highlight the term “intercultural homiletic” as this best describes what I want to propose. The term, “intercultural,” means “of, relating, or representing different cultures.”² It is distinct from “popular culture” that differentiates subcultures of generations or other social homogenous groups. The term intercultural is often used interchangeably with the term cross-cultural.³ Technically, cross-cultural research compares behavior between two or more cultures (e.g. self-disclosure in Japan and Iran when members interact with others in their culture) while intercultural research examines the behavior when two or more cultures interact (e.g. Iranian self-disclosure when interacting with Japanese).⁴ An intercultural homiletic recognizes the cultural dimension operating in preaching when other ethnic groups are present in the congregation. In most cases in North America this will be predominantly

¹ Alice Matthews evoked a standing ovation by women in the audience when she used a sewing machine as an illustration and then offhandedly said, “this was my sweet revenge for all of the football stories that I have heard over the years” in “Women as Listeners Discussion,” *PulpitTalk* 1:4 (S. Hampton, MA: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Summer 2003). See also her book *Preaching that Speaks to Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003). Of course the sewing machine is not the exclusive domain of women nor sports the domain of men.

² www.dictionary.com.

³ James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁴ William B. Gudykunst, “Issues in Cross-Cultural Communication Research,” In *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2nd ed., ed. William B. Gudykunst and Bella Mody (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), f.n. 1, 175-76.

a European American preacher whose roots extend many generations in North America and a congregation containing a minority of ethnic others. The preacher will speak in English and intentionally include the others in the act of preaching. To introduce the subject, in this paper I will develop a theological foundation for an intercultural homiletic, examine the contributions of intercultural speech communication and missiology, and then offer some specific suggestions how to practice an intercultural homiletic.

A Theological Foundation for an Intercultural Homiletic

Christian Scripture reveals God as an inclusive and welcoming God. Even post-Fall, God has sought after people to regain Edenic-like fellowship. Amidst the covenants were blessings extended to “all people of the earth” (Genesis 12:3).⁵ While there was a chosen people, these people were to be God’s light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6). So the salvific message was to spread to others in the universality of the gospel. God welcomes all people to the blessings of the gospel.

Specifically in the Hebrew Scriptures, God extends special concern to the less privileged: the orphans, widows, and the aliens (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Ps. 146:9). The aliens (also called strangers) who were outside the covenant were not to be mistreated or oppressed. They were to be loved for the significant reason that the Hebrew people personally had experience as aliens, “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). Even as an extension of neighborly love (Lev. 19:18) they were to be treated as one of the local-born (Lev. 19:33-34).

The one who provides the best insight into understanding “the other” culturally-speaking is Jung Young Lee in his book *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*.⁶ While written from an Asian American immigrant perspective, Lee puts a positive spin on marginality as not only the ethnic other but also all believers are part of the new marginality. Jesus-Christ, divine and human, is seen as a hyphenated person (language that parallels the joining of two cultures like Asian-American) and the model of marginality as the God-person. We are to emulate Jesus Christ in an incarnational ministry (Philippians 2:3-11) to reach out to the marginalized of society.

The Christians in the early church followed Jesus’ example to reach out beyond their own culture. The New (or 2nd) Testament paradigm for ministry to others, particularly communicatively is Pentecost (Acts 2). Through the Holy Spirit, Hebraistic Jews spoke with other tongues to the various nationalities and languages represented.

⁵ The *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible is used in this paper unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Note my book review of this significant work in *Homiletic* 22:1 (Summer 1997): 55-56. See also Sang Hyun Lee, “Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 16:1 (1995): 49-64 and Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

Pentecost is seen as the foundation of the Spirit-filled multicultural church. The Gospel extended beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

This gospel would reach various people. The principle is bound up in the Great Commission to reach all nations. This includes and literally means ethnic groups. The Apostle Paul drew from the cultural context of the audience when speaking to the Athenians in Acts 17. The resultant church would be one of believers in Jesus Christ with barriers broken down (Ephesians 2) experiencing a co-existing and reconciliation of people of various backgrounds. Even before the throne would be redeemed people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9-10) so these distinctions carry on until the end. Instead of exclusion the people of God were to embrace others.⁷ This inclusive nature extends to church life, gospel living and outreach, worship, and preaching.

Insight from Intercultural Speech Communication for an Intercultural Homiletic

A prime underutilized resource for preaching is intercultural speech communication. As a field of study it “investigates the dynamics of interaction among persons of differing ethnic or national origin.”⁸ There are many advantages for accessing this social science discipline. However, there are also some deficiencies as well, in forming an intercultural homiletic.

Advantageously, intercultural speech communication deals specifically with effectively interacting with people of different cultures. It builds upon the general principles of ancient and modern rhetoric plus communication studies, then expands and applies them to people interacting from various ethnic backgrounds. It collaborates with other social sciences like psychology and sociology in developing theories and experimentation. Intercultural speech communication like preaching is an art and a skill.

The communicator examines him/herself and the party with whom he/she is communicating. The communicator self-reflects on his/her prejudice and stereotypes of various groups.⁹ It is even necessary to look at the motivation behind communicating with others. Is it due to genuine interest or pity? A helpful theory for the communicator is the Anxiety Uncertainty Management Theory by William B. Gudykunst.¹⁰ He conveys

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). See also his “Embracing the Other” *The Princeton Theological Review* 10:2 (Spring 2004): 4-9.

⁸ Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starorta, *Foundations of Intercultural Communication* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 6.

⁹ William B. Gudykunst has a number of self-assessment tools in *Bridging Differences*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

¹⁰ The current development of the William B. Gudykunst’s theory is “An Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Effective Communication: Making the Mesh of the Net Finer,” in *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication*, ed. William B. Gudykunst (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, in press). The draft is found at <http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/bgudykunst/AUMeffectivecomm.doc>.

that the speaker needs to manage his/her anxiety or feelings toward others in intercultural communication settings. Moreover he/she must manage the uncertainty or knowledge that he/she has regarding the other person's culture. Remember that there are various subcultures and a clue is the self-designation of the person. A person of mixed ethnicity or race usually sees him/herself in a particular way, often leaning to one way like actress Halle Berry. She identifies herself with her African-American heritage as in her 2002 Best Actress Academy award acceptance speech.

Moreover, language issues are taken into account. Does the other person come from another culture that communicates in a different way such as directly or indirectly? Learning styles differ from culture to culture. One notes language capabilities when in the congregation are people who have varying degrees of English comprehension. Non-verbal usage is important for the extent and meaning of gesturing.

Just as preaching skills can be learned, so can intercultural communication skills. Important skills to acquire include empathy by careful listening, flexibility, and mindfulness. Empathy is a central element to enter into and share another's experience.¹¹ Preachers are often poor listeners, more "gifted" at speaking than listening. In my preaching classes a student often voices feedback to a student with a strong accent at the end of the semester, "You sure have improved your clarity in English." Now this may be the case but my sense is that the native English speaker had improved careful listening skills. Flexibility requires the ability to adapt behavior to others in content and manner of speaking like speaking directly or indirectly. The single most important skill when conversing with "strangers"¹² is mindfulness. This means to consciously monitor conversations in terms of cultural sensitivity. It is central to both managing anxiety and uncertainty.¹³

One deficiency to using intercultural speech communication for preaching is that the focus is mainly on one-to-one interpersonal interactions. In contrast, the preacher is communicating with a group, often consisting of diverse people. The principles are still applicable as preachers often keep in mind individuals in the congregation. It is important to address the congregation as a whole and well as the individuals. Such study of one-to-one interactions will also help the preacher in extending pastoral care and building relationships with people outside of "the preaching moment."

Another deficiency is that the focus is on initial encounters with strangers. This does not exclude ongoing relationships. Of course there needs to be initial encounters before ongoing relationships take place. In today's congregations there may be only

¹¹ Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starorta, "Intercultural Competence" in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 409-11.

¹² William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*, 4th ed. (Reading, MS: Addison-Wesley, Publishing, 2003). The authors consider a "stranger" as a person outside of one's cultural in-group.

¹³ Gudykunst and Kim, 285.

initial encounters with those from other groupings who come to visit the local church. There are some other dimensions of ongoing relationships as well. Recently there is an influx of people from China and other countries that frequent churches. They may come to explore Christianity, learn English, and build friendships or a combination of these reasons.

Overall the concept of an “intercultural person”¹⁴ is beneficial nomenclature. He/she is growing in the motivation, attitude, and skills to communicate with those of different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, the person delivering sermons can become an intercultural preacher. He/she has the opportunity to connect with others through empathetic and appropriate communication in sermons.

The Contribution of Missiology for an Intercultural Homiletic

Many Christian communicators have been intentionally speaking to people from different cultures for years. These are missionaries located abroad or at home. They venture to another cultural context to live out and proclaim the gospel. While they try to package the gospel in a form understandable and acceptable by people in another culture, they unintentionally export their own cultural baggage. Missiology is an aspect of theology but warrants a particular discussion here as it has particular pertinence for an intercultural homiletic. A number of seminaries are using the term “intercultural studies” instead of missiology or missions studies.

One person who conveyed tremendous insight back to our Western context was the missionary statesperson, J. Lesslie Newbigin. His searing and prophetic declaration echoing an Indonesian General is that the West needs to be converted.¹⁵ While there is particular pertinence to our postmodern North American context, there is applicability to the cultures resident among a broader Western milieu.

Newbigin notably points out the conversion or transformation of the preacher in conveying of the gospel to Cornelius in Acts 10. He states, “A true missionary encounter, like the meeting with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10), will profoundly change both the missionary and the community to whom he brings the Gospel.”¹⁶ Like the massive change in perspective of the Apostle Peter, so the “conversion” of the missionary/preacher is of primary concern.

The missionary seeks to discover as much as possible about the people. This means to research by material and personal interaction the customs of the people. He/she is often looking for the inroads of the Gospel. This person ministers in the cultural context of the people. Often learning another language is necessary for

¹⁴ Gudykunst and Kim, 388.

¹⁵ J. Lesslie Newbigin, “The Gospel and Our Culture” talk (1990) from www.newbigin.net.

¹⁶ Newbigin, “The Bible in Our Contemporary Mission” (*Clergy Review* 69:1, 1984), 10.

communication. Speaking a person's first language often breaks the barrier of communication. It indicates that the communicator cares enough to learn the listener's native language.

Building relationships with others of a different cultural background facilitates better communication. Missionaries live in close proximity to the people and interact with them as much as possible. Trust is built up over time on both sides of the communication equation. The spiritual resource of prayer bathes the whole relationship in influencing others toward Christ.

There is current discussion in missiology centering on churches becoming missional.¹⁷ This means that pastors lead local congregations to discover and fulfill the mission of the local church. The congregation will look at its own people and the place where God has placed the people to see the potential for ministry and social impact. Eyes will be open to see beyond the local congregation to the community and the broader world, all with a kingdom perspective. Preaching in such a context requires a missionary perspective.

“Missionary preaching”¹⁸ is necessary to communicate the Christian message in the post-Christian North America. Ronald J. Allen notes the sermon's contribution to the missionary life of the congregation to convey such areas are the congregational responsibilities and social justice.¹⁹ So missionary preaching is more than evangelistic preaching to the “outsider” but also involves broader issues of Christian witness to others around and an equipping of believers for life and verbal witness.

The local church has the unique opportunity to reach out interculturally to enable people to acclimate into the community. Not only does the church reach other ethnic groups but other groups enrich the church as well. The body of Christ is enhanced by the rich gift of culture.

Missiology is a good resource for an intercultural homiletic as it examines the missionary, the cultural context of the people, and the language necessary to communicate effectively. In our post-Christian context we need to become more like missionaries to communicate the Christian message. We cannot assume a common vocabulary and reference points as in modernity. The shift to a missional perspective brings missions from out there to our own pulpits.

¹⁷ Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, “Missions” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1995, 335-36. See also Walter Brueggemann's “Embracing the Transformation: A Comment on Missionary Preaching,” *Journal for Preachers* 11:2 (Lent 1988): 8-18.

¹⁹ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and Practical Ministry* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 116-17. “The Preacher as Missionary” is the title of chapter 5, pp. 95-118.

An Intercultural Homiletic

“The Christian sermon is inclusive,” asserts homiletician Ronald J. Allen.²⁰ By this he means that a wide range of listeners are accounted for in the sermon including dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and age. Particularly with the rise of audience considerations has such inclusivity been brought to the forefront. Areas as gender, gender orientation, disability, and age have been addressed homiletically. Also specific strategies to speak to specific ethnic groups as African, Asian and Hispanic American have been articulated. The issue of speaking to the ethnic diversity of the congregation has not explored in depth. Only a few books look at the mixed ethnic diversity and subcultures with a congregation and beyond.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale’s *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* provides a methodology for contextual preaching.²¹ This methodology requires exegeting the congregation and preaching in context. This book mentions the intercultural (she prefers the term cross-cultural) as well as the missiological dimensions for preaching but does not develop them thoroughly. This is one of the key texts related to an intercultural homiletic. I also agree with Eunjo Mary Kim’s critique of the book in that we need to look the local congregation broader issues and setting that impinge on the congregation.²²

A book that does discuss ethnicity in relationship to preaching is *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross Cultural Strategies* by James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers.²³ Ethnicity is used as one of the cultural frames along with class, displacement, and beliefs. Ethnicity should be seen in relationship to other dimensions. Surely gender and ethnicity is a worthy topic of exploration. It is helpful to look at ethnicity in the context of dynamics and consider its relationship to other dimensions. Like Tisdale’s book this text helps the preacher to look at the context for preaching. This book draws from various pastors who meet this challenge weekly and what they perceive as effective preaching. It would be good to interview congregations to see if these perceptions hold true, especially to connect with the diversity of ethnicity in various settings.

One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation by Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. and Ronald J. Allen includes a chapter on “Preaching in Multicultural Settings.” A number of helpful suggestions for preaching are: the preacher teaches the congregation about its multiple cultures, the preacher reflects critically and

²⁰ Allen, *Preaching for Growth* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988), 49. “The Christian Sermon is Inclusive” is this title for this section of his book, pp. 49-52.

²¹ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

²² Eunjo Mary Kim, “A Theological Reflection on Contextual Preaching,” *Papers of the 37th Academy of Homiletics*, Claremont, CA, 2003, 223.

²³ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew*. See my review of this book in *Consensus: The Canadian Lutheran Journal for Theology* 29:1 (Fall 2003): 158-59.

theologically on culture, the preacher helps the congregation toward multicultural worship, and the preacher leads the congregation into multicultural mission.²⁴

The key to an intercultural homiletic is that the person grows to become an intercultural preacher. Some of these changes in attitude and skills are outlined below.²⁵ They are understanding one's own cultural perspective, empathy and understanding, partnership, language, and pastoral interaction with people.

The intercultural preacher realizes the influence of culture on his or her own perspective. One's upbringing and previous experiences shade one's view of other ethnic groups. Personal social location is a good starting reflection point. He or she realizes who self is and how others perceive him or her.

There is empathy and marked understanding of the diversity in the congregation. Even as the sensitivity increases for the cultural diversity, sensitivity for other diversity in the congregation will increase as well. The language and references used would not be generic but represent the cultural diversity found inside and outside the congregation. Usage of illustrations and application is the primary way that ethnicity is noted. A good tool is "A Chart to Help Preachers Include Material for a Wide Range of Listeners"²⁶ of which ethnicity is a part. The preacher can modify the chart to represent his/her congregation with its cultures and subcultures and the world around the church. This way the preacher can keep track of when references are made pertinent to particular groups. Eyes and ears would be on the news for world events that bear on the congregation.

The intercultural preacher partners with others for effective preaching before, during, and after the sermon. Before the sermon can a study group on the passage or contact with people who could provide insight, illustrations, and application. During the sermon the preacher would monitor the speaking and scan the congregants for diversity. Good eye contact is required for this to take place. Reading off of a sermon manuscript may be difficult for such eye contact. Following the sermon feedback from the congregation is necessary to see if the sermon connected with the constituency. A guest or itinerant preacher would have more challenges in this area. That person should find out as much information as possible from the pastor of the church in advance.

This preacher examines the language or style used in communication. The content is still the Scripture with Christian tradition but the way things are said may need to change. Metaphors and illustrations can be lost in translation. Those whose second or

²⁴ Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 113-28.

²⁵ I have suggestions earlier in my "Multicultural Preaching and Its Implications for Pedagogy," Papers of the 35th Academy of Homiletics, St. Louis, MO, 2001, 171-83. I use the term "multicultural" and "intercultural" synonymously in that paper as in this one. The technical term "intercultural" is used in this paper.

²⁶ Jeter and Allen, 179-81.

third language is English would find difficulty understanding certain vocabulary. Preachers are using PowerPoint or printed outlines to provide some of the vocabulary. An immigrant's capability in reading of English is often greater than listening of English.

The intercultural preacher's skills would increase as he or she interacts pastorally with congregational members and groups. Even travel to certain parts of the world or visit to the ethnic pockets of the city would heighten the preacher's awareness. Many pastors and professors have profited greatly by experiencing mission trips or teaching segments in various countries or settings. They themselves have an experience as a minority and their cultural sensitivity enjoys a sharp learning curve.

Conclusion

Practicing an intercultural homiletic is tremendously challenging. It requires additional analytical and communication skills and sensitivity training for the preacher in our rapidly changing world. Those in the margins who have often been overlooked or ignored in the today's sermons appreciate such preaching.

While the intercultural preacher may do all he/she can do to increase the effectiveness in this type of preaching, other people are necessary. While a story may be told of a person's experience in another land, how much more powerful would it be to hear from that specific person? Even if interpretation is needed for the testimonial, the visibility and voice of the person are powerful. Pulpit exchanges or speakers from other cultural groups enhance the congregation's perspective on what God is doing in the world.

We who teach preaching are also thinking long and hard of how we may train preachers for a multicultural world. Would there be a singular approach or a variety of approaches? Would we appreciate the African-American style in our classes? Not only how do we preach but also how do we teach to students with ethnic diversity? All of us who teach preaching struggle with these issues.

An intercultural homiletic is a work in progress drawing from theology, intercultural speech communication, and missiology in its formulation. We intercultural preachers are a work in progress as well. We will face new people and situations that draw out the inner resources accompanied by our ongoing learning for even more effective preaching and ministry.

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This paper was presented for the Preaching and Theology Group at the 39th Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, Memphis, Tennessee, December 3, 2004. It is in a slightly revised and updated version here. Its original form was printed in the Papers of the Annual Meeting, pp. 308-16. I was asked during the response time to my paper whether it was all a matter of inserting appropriate illustrations for the congregation. My initial answer was "yes." However, upon further

reflection I believe that this type of preaching requires a different framework of thinking that influences our whole approach to preaching in multicultural settings.

Refer to my paper, "Multicultural Preaching and Its Implications for Pedagogy," as much of what I say here is complementary to that paper.