

Preaching in a Culturally Diverse Congregation

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Introduction

John Stott described preaching as “bridge-building,” meaning that the preacher must connect the world of the ancient text to the world of the contemporary audience.¹ The task for preachers in a multiethnic community is much more complex. They have to build multiple bridges from the biblical text to connect with a diverse congregation.

As urbanization continues, more people from around the world are moving to American cities. This reality should excite pastors who minister in cities. These people are moving here primarily because of job opportunities. They want to make sure their families flourish. They bring with them their large families and their culture. Most of them come from non-Christian backgrounds. Urban preachers now have to see themselves as missionaries not just to one foreign culture, but to several. How should preachers adapt in order to minister faithfully to them?

In his book *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, Matthew Kim defines culture as “a group’s way of living, way of thinking, and way of behaving in the world, for which we need understanding and empathy to guide listeners toward Christian maturity.”² The preacher must realize not all people think like they do. This understanding requires the preacher to think deeply and interrogate their own culture.³ The first step in this process is to realize their ways of behaving, thinking, and practice are not universal and should not be universally enforced. This paper will examine the apostolic practices, scriptural basis, and cultural nuances that should be considered in order to show how preachers can faithfully build bridges from the biblical text to multicultural congregations.

Acts 13, 17, and 1 Corinthians

Acts 13 features Paul preaching to a Jewish audience in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.⁴ He offered an exposition of Scripture and described the One who is the Redeemer and Judge of Israel, Jesus. Since he was speaking to Jews, he started with what they knew—the Torah. He rehearsed Israel’s history but highlighted kingship,

salvation, and the Law of Moses. These themes led him into the main emphasis of the message—Jesus as the king, son of David, Savior, and the fulfillment of the Law.

The concept of Christ's work and role determined the content of the message, while the audience (Jews) determined the delivery. Obviously, Paul was not preaching cross-culturally to this audience. These were his kinsman. However, he did build common ground in acknowledging his identity with them. His use of pronouns (*our* and *us*) and his referring to the crowd as "brethren" show that he was not a distant witness, but was one of them.

Being a Pharisee, Paul knew the Jews and their traditions well, but he also studied other cultures' beliefs and practice in order to communicate a universal gospel. In Acts 17 Luke described Paul's speech to some Greek philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens. Paul expounded the Genesis narrative of God's creation and then described the One who rose from the dead and will come to judge the world.

Since he was speaking to Greeks, Paul started with what they knew—nature and Greek poetry. He portrayed their unknown God as the Creator, the One who sustains them, the One who is too great to dwell in things made with hands, and the One who will judge the whole world. This God will accomplish His purpose through the One whom He raised from the dead.

Just like Acts 13, the concept of Christ's work and role drove the content of the message and the audience (Greeks) determined the delivery. Bruce notes, "If the tone of the Areopagitica is different from that of Romans 1-3 (as it is), Paul's ability to adapt his tone and his approach to his audience must not be underestimated."⁵ Paul appealed to the common ground the Jew and the Greek had between each other—belief in a sovereign God who creates, sustains, and judges. However, he explained they were missing an understanding of their sin and the identity of the One who will judge them.⁶

In Acts 13 and Acts 17 the destination of the message was the same, but the journey was different. Paul's rhetorical reason may be explained in his first letter to the church in Corinth:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without the law as one without the law though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

Paul obviously tailored his message and behavior to the audience while remaining faithful to the content of the message and to Christ's moral commands.

Paul adopted the cultural customs and language of people to whom he preached so nothing would hinder them from accepting the message.⁷ Was this approach simply an evangelistic strategy or was it also his practice in his development of churches?

1 Corinthians contains a section in which Paul defended his ministry. Because of his constant attacks he explained why he behaved as he did. He submitted himself to the culture around him in order to find common ground (1 Cor. 9). However, he adopted this practice not only in the proclamation of the gospel, but also in the practice of the church. After speaking about marriage in chapter 7, Paul described what practices should be kept and what needed to be changed in light of entering into the community of Christ: “Only as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches” (1 Cor. 7:17).

Paul’s vision of the church was one in which the many cultures and ethnicities interacted without giving up their respective cultural identities.⁸ Their common ground was the gospel and Christ’s commands. Paul’s ministry was focused on Christ-formation (Col. 1:28) regardless of cultural background. This diverse group was a new community. James Thompson writes that Paul’s Gentile ministry was dedicated to showing them that “their identity, their shared story, and their conduct are inextricably combined, giving them the cohesiveness to live as a minority community in a hostile environment.”⁹ The apostolic approach demands that preachers know the text and the audience.

Exegesis of Scripture

The starting point for preaching and teaching must be proper exegesis of the Holy Scripture. God has communicated to His people in a book containing varieties of literary genres. Scripture has been given in order to teach the nations about worship and obedience of the one true God. David Allen defines a text-driven sermon as one that “develops a text by explaining, illustrating, and applying its meaning. Text-driven preaching stays true to the substance of the text, the structure of the text, and the spirit of the text.”¹⁰ If the biblical text is the foundation of the preaching/teaching event, then the preacher must begin with that text.

The process starts with the text and goes through the order of observation, interpretation, and application. Observation is the first part of the exegetical process and often requires the most time. This part of the process includes noting terms that are repeated and/or emphasized structure, genre, people/places mentioned, and any other details of the text.¹¹ Not only does observation help the preacher accurately interpret and apply the text, but it often helps expose some cultural blind spots. Paying attention to the literary details of the narrative exposes the writer’s assumptions about the intended audience. For example, the fact that Jesus and his disciples were from Galilee plays a role in their reception by people from other

regions in Judea. Good observation forces the reader to pay attention and grasp the author's intended thrust in the text.¹²

Identifying the theological thrust is the heart of the next step: interpretation. What is the author saying and why is he saying it? Why did God give His people this information and what were they to do with it? Interpretation seeks to answer these questions. Interpretation takes the data from observation and seeks to synthesize it. Context, correlation, and consultation mark this step.¹³ The text is read in light of its context and interpreted with consideration of other texts.¹⁴ This step also includes the use of commentaries, word studies, and other exegetical guides.

Application is the crucial final step. Each text calls for some type of response from the reader/hearer. Application always has the audience in mind. While most evangelicals hold a one-meaning understanding of a biblical text, the student of Scripture may find several valid applications. The theological thrust stands as the bridge between the text and application. Application is text derived and audience appropriated.¹⁵ During the application process, the preacher focuses on the audience. He must think through the various life situations of his congregation in order to illustrate and apply the text properly. Application is already a challenge for a culturally homogeneous congregation. The reality of a multiethnic congregation makes for much more work for the homiletician.

Exegesis of Cultures in the Congregation

Exegesis does not stop with the text; it must continue to the congregation. Preachers must fervently study not only the biblical text but also consider the people to whom he is ministering. John Stott used the term "double-listening" to explain how the preacher listens to the text of Scripture and to the world around him.¹⁶ Although the voices often contradict one another, the preacher must show how both of these worlds relate to each other.

Preaching to a culturally diverse congregation requires even more time-intensive study. Richards and O'Brien suggest that "the most powerful cultural values are the ones that go without being said." At this point misunderstanding and misinterpretation often happen.¹⁷ How should American preachers approach persons in the congregation who are from different cultural backgrounds? Should he encourage these congregants to conform to the majority's cultural ideas and behaviors, or should he take the various minorities' ideas and behaviors into consideration?

According to Paul's missionary approach in 1 Corinthians, he apparently allowed for varied cultural expression. However, all the cultures were to be united by the Gospel narrative and ethical norms. In order to communicate effectively, the preacher must keep these ideas in consideration: the role of the preacher, worldviews, and accommodation/contextualization.

The Role of the Preacher

As much as preachers claim that the message is not about them, and indeed it is not, the message still is tied to the messenger. An audience hears the message through a person. How the message is heard and understood is greatly affected by the one who is presenting it. The ethos, or the perceived credibility of the speaker, carries a humbling burden.

This burden is given a heavier load when a preacher ministers to an ethnically diverse congregation. He must build credibility with many groups in the audience. How can the urban preacher carry it? Writing about preachers, David Hesselgrave argues, “They cannot command a hearing. They must win a hearing by demonstrating that they are a people of integrity, credibility, and goodwill.”¹⁸ This position means the preacher must spend time in people’s living rooms, kitchens, and social gatherings. Preachers must see themselves as learners and admirers of their congregants’ cultures.

Understanding people’s customs helps build the bridges of communication. The preacher must go beyond merely engaging in an occasional conversation. Kenneth Burke observes, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.”¹⁹ Obviously, some practices and ideas are clearly antithetical to Scripture. The preacher is not commissioned to take part in these customs because he is still under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). However, as much as possible he must familiarize himself with them. Culture is not a bad thing. It may be very good. However, recognizing the differences matters for effective communication.

Worldviews

The preacher must not only consider behavioral and linguistic differences, but also worldview differences. Worldviews are not necessarily religious differences. The way various cultures view things is not necessarily wrong. Westerners think differently than Easterners. Canadians think differently than Iranians. African-Americans think differently than Caucasian-Americans. These differences are not bad. Therefore, the preacher must begin to understand the mindset of the other culture in order to communicate well.

Michael Kearney defines worldview as “their way of looking at reality. It consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world.”²⁰ When someone comes to know the Lord Jesus Christ, he or she experiences a shift in worldview. However, the way a person views life is still culturally different. Duane Elmer recognizes eight ways in which various cultures differ in mindset.²¹ The preaching event demands recognition of at least four of these ways.

First, what does the culture prioritize more – task or relationship? Westerners, especially persons in North America, are more likely to be task-driven. They love

goals, step-by-step procedures, and planning courses of action. They prioritize efficiency and getting the job done. Relationships, although not totally disregarded, are given a back seat in favor of the task at hand. People are sometimes viewed as means to a greater goal. This approach affects the way the minister views his ministry. The agenda may be prioritized over the person. Preaching often comes across as overly simplistic, individualized, systematic, and goal-oriented.

Non-Westerners (Africans, Middle-Easterners, Asians, even Latin Americans) lean more on relationship basis. This approach does not mean there is no productivity, but rather that the interest is more oriented on the bonding of relationships in the midst of working. With this concept in mind, the preacher must think through the application of the text. Should the preacher show the text's relevance by listing an impersonal step-by-step procedure, or should he think through its relevance pertaining to community bonds and love for God and neighbor?

Second, do the various church members focus more on the individual or the community? Non-westerners see themselves not as isolated individuals, but as members within a greater community. Westerners generally emphasize individuality and independence. They often make their own decisions and do what is best for themselves. They may be affected by personal guilt. They often see right or wrong based on objective laws that may be internalized as a personal conscience.

Collectivistic cultures value interdependence and esteem the group over themselves. Right or wrong is seen through the perspective of what is expected by the community in which someone lives. Decisions are based on what will bring honor or shame to their group. Very rarely do people make individual decisions. They will do activities together or will act based on what is best for their group. Therefore, the preacher has to ask himself, "Are my applications geared toward individual fulfillment or toward corporate interdependence?" A close reading of the New Testament epistles shows the apostolic exhortations focused more towards corporate application. Even personal exhortations are within a church context.

Third, do they think categorically or holistically? North Americans tend to compartmentalize life. For example, they think in terms of work/play, sacred/secular, study/devotion, etc. Elmer admits, "My own witness as a Westerner is quite categorical. I rely on words. Witness is a verbal activity for many of us. Yet perhaps the majority of the world looks at our lives as the primary witness."²² In what is termed "two-thirds world," life is integrated. No clear distinctions exist between different phases or activities in life. The preacher would do well in his illustration and application not to focus just on a select few activities and attitudes deemed as "Christian." Perhaps the speaker should show how a text relates to all of life. Regardless of which phase of life or activity they engage, preachers must demonstrate how this text speaks to it.

Finally, is their thought progression straight or curved? This idea plays a crucial role in understanding how to communicate to persons from outside the West.

Westerners are mainly linear thinkers; they think in terms of cause and effect and progression of ideas. They like each point of the speech to be linked to the other and desire to be clear and to the point. The thinking process for many people outside the West is varied. Often, Americans who listen to preachers from other countries will find it hard to follow their discourses while the nationals totally understand them.

The reverse is true sometimes. Many non-westerners find linear and definite discourse to be overly aggressive and condescending. It takes time and patience to learn how to communicate in a way others understand. The preacher must ask, “Do all of my sermons follow the same structural pattern?” It may be understandable to your predominantly western audience, but misunderstood by your non-western congregants. Variety in structure should help remedy this problem.

Accommodation/Contextualization

The preacher is a servant and a shepherd for the congregation. There cannot be a severance between preaching and pastoral ministry since a preacher must know and love his audience.²³ As a servant, he is to humble himself and learn from his congregants. He must remember he is not communicating to cultures but to persons.²⁴ It is one thing to learn about a culture through books; it is another thing to be present with them and engage. He must submit to their language, behavior, and worldview unless they are antithetical to Scripture.

Should preachers accommodate every culture in every sermon? Just like preaching to a culturally homogeneous congregation, not every application and illustration is going to connect with everybody. Not every sermon illustration and application will connect with every ethnicity in the congregation. However, the attempt to connect with everyone in the audience should always be in the forefront of the preacher’s mind. To communicate in a way that builds up the diverse body, preachers must include some element of contextualization.

Hesselgrave defines contextualization as

the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out of the Great Commission.²⁵

Contextualization includes more than just adjusting the content of the message. For the preaching event, it includes rethinking phrasing, illustration, application,

delivery, and pastoral ministry. The preacher must become a great observer. How he communicates is as important to remember as what he communicates.

The content of Scripture is universal and never changing. However, without betraying the message, Jesus and the New Testament preachers demonstrated much variety in how they communicated the gospel.²⁶ Jesus presented Himself in various ways, depending on to whom He was speaking. As previously mentioned, the book of Acts gives several examples of contextualized preaching.

While it may seem obvious, the preacher must give attention to phrasing and definition of terms. He must start with himself and the text, asking, “How would my Ugandan brothers (or other cultural groups) read this text?” Sometimes other cultures have a much better understanding of a text, especially narratives because their culture is much more like the one of 1st century Palestine. Comparison and contrast should become his friends. He should speak in their terms. Like Paul in Acts, the preacher must start with what the people know and build from there.

He must also vary his delivery. Some cultures put a much more heavy emphasis on non-verbal communication than Western Europeans and White Americans. In this case, the preacher would do well to observe how the people communicate in daily life. Observe their tone of voice, gestures, how they describe things, and how long they speak. If he can learn from them the preacher is on his way to being a better pastor.

Conclusion

Balancing proper exegesis of the text with communicating to a diverse audience is challenging, but it is also rewarding. This task requires much patience and grace. Many cultural *faux pas* are bound to happen unknowingly. The preacher must walk as a humble servant before his congregants of other cultures. American cities are continuing to grow not just numerically, but also in diversity. Although it is not possible to address every worldview or culture in this short article, the same principles apply to all of them.

With Koreans, be like Koreans. With the Lebanese, be like the Lebanese. With Ugandans, be like Ugandans. This attitude was the mindset of Paul, who was following the incarnational characteristic of Christ (Phil. 2:5-7). Matthew Kim suggests, “Even in preaching ministry, we are either perpetuating prejudice with our silence or making progress toward peace, healing, and reconciliation in our churches.”²⁷ Obviously, it will take more than the preaching ministry to reach our community. It should also include diversity in leadership and other ministries as well.

Our urban and suburban neighborhoods have beautiful diversity. May all Christian preachers take on the incarnational mindset of servitude for the uplifting of brothers and neighbors from all over the world. Then maybe our churches would

reflect the rich cultural diversity of our communities while remaining united in Christ our Lord.

NOTES

1. John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137.
2. Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. The text also mentions that God fearers were present as well. These people were probably Gentiles who respected the God of Israel and Jewish customs. See Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 451.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 379.
6. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 285-88.
7. Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 147.
8. Anders Runesson, "Paul's Rule in All the Ekklesiai," in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 220.
9. James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: WJK, 2001), 101.
10. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews, *Text Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 8.
11. Robert A. Traina, *Methodological Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 27-87; Howard G. Hendricks, *Living By The Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 51-55; Richard Alan Fuhr, Jr. and Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 46-151.
12. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 102.
13. Fuhr and Kostenberger, 179-288.
14. Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 71-76.
15. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 175.
16. John R.W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 29.
17. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 12.
18. David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 146-47.
19. Kenneth Burke, *Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World, Meridian, 1962), 579.
20. Michael Kearney, *World View* (Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp, 1984), 41.

21. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 117-90. These include Time & Event, Task & Relationship, Individualism & Collectivism, Categorical & Holistic Thinking, Straight or Curved Logic, Achieved Status & Ascribed Status, Guilt & Shame, and High or Low Worship Expression.
22. Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, 145.
23. Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 33.
24. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 175.
25. David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 200.
26. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 149.
27. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 95.