

## Preaching from Where You Are: Culture in Homiletics

MICAH JACKSON\*

*Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place.* By Sally Brown and Luke Powery. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2016. 255pp. \$34.00 (paper).

*Christian Preaching and Worship in Multicultural Contexts: A Practical Theological Approach.* By Eunjoo Mary Kim. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2017. 208pp. \$29.95 (paper).

*Anxious to Talk about It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism.* By Carolyn Helsel. St Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2018. 127pp. \$19.95 (paper).

*Crossover Preaching: Intercultural-Improvisational Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor.* By Jared Alcántara. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 309pp. \$40.00 (paper).

It is likely obvious to anyone preparing and delivering sermons in Episcopal churches today that the church is growing in diversity. Very few congregations are finding that they can continue to do what they have always done and remain as they have always been. This should not be surprising when one looks beyond the pews to the reality of rapid demographic changes in the United States.

This inevitable change should cause us to wonder how best to respond, although the mainline American church has not thought much about preaching in times or to communities of pervasive cultural diversity. Nor has it been an area of frequent teaching in seminaries or

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\* Micah Jackson is the president and professor of preaching at Bexley Seabury Seminary in Chicago. He is a former board member of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation and eleven-time member of the Preaching Excellence Program faculty. He is the author of *Preaching Face to Face: An Invitation to Conversational Preaching* (forthcoming).

other programs of homiletical formation. However, the time has arrived when preachers seeking to be effective in the next decades must begin to prepare sermons that are able to speak to those who differ in important ways. This is certainly true for white preachers, but it is true for any preacher who wishes to minister in the more diverse church of the future.

Fortunately, some contemporary homileticians have begun to consider how preachers and preaching might change to accommodate, or even to capitalize on, these changes. In this essay, I will review four such recent efforts, and then offer some reflections of my own on the potential ways forward that these works represent.

One absolutely key step in preparing culturally sensitive sermons is understanding one's own time and place, including social location and cultural frame. Unless a preacher can truly embrace this reality, she cannot engage other cultural frames without risking cultural appropriation or tourism. Of course, the danger of being unmoored from one's own cultural reality is that adopting the vocabulary, metaphors, distinctive speech patterns, and so on of another culture can seem disrespectful, or worse. Fortunately, Sally Brown and Luke Powery's masterful *Ways of the Word* assists preachers in considering how understanding one's own social location allows a preacher to engage another, and indeed can deepen and enrich the encounter.

This flows first by the example of the authors themselves. The two writers are alike in their commitment to preaching and to the teaching of preaching. However, they are very different in other ways. They represent a diversity of gender, age, race, and theological background. This recognition of similarity and difference is the ground upon which their advice to preachers is built. Recognizing the value of their diversity, they elected in most cases to write each chapter separately, rather than attempting to harmonize their ideas or writing. Instead, there are frequent sidebars in which the other author offers additional comments on the subject, sometimes offering a differing perspective, sometimes deepening a point, sometimes simply adding a supplemental illustration.

The innovative structure, however, would be only a quirk, if not for the actual content of the book. This work is intended as a companion and encouragement to those who are already preaching, and not primarily as an introduction to those first encountering the homiletical task. While the book addresses similar topics to those found

in elementary preaching texts, it takes up the subjects in a far more advanced way. For example, the book's treatment of the process for interpreting the text for preaching goes far beyond the academically focused tools of biblical exegesis as found in seminary training. Its suggestions include ways of incorporating the congregation in the exegetical process, as well as techniques for making sermon preparation part of the preacher's prayer life, and for honing the message to ensure it effectively engages the lives of the hearers. These deeper dives into the process of preaching make for a book that will repay careful preachers who read, or reread, it at various stages of their career.

*Ways of the Word* begins with a chapter on the role of the Holy Spirit in the homiletical task. Powery moves quickly past the facile statement that the Spirit is (or should be) the source of preaching. Indeed, he shares an anecdote to demonstrate that calling upon the Holy Spirit does not necessarily result in more powerful preaching. Instead, Powery shows that taking Spirit-animated preaching seriously means understanding that the Spirit moves where it will, and that the Spirit animates the church and the preacher within the various contexts in which they find themselves. This is just as the Spirit did on the day of Pentecost, when the first believers found themselves communicating the gospel across cultural lines. Preaching and preachers exist within a context, and it is precisely that context that the Spirit uses to ensure that the gospel is relevant to all believers in all times and in all places.

One of the timeliest sections of this book is its engagement with the question of preaching and technology. While acknowledging the many things that are lost (or could be lost) when the incarnational act of preaching is mediated through technology, it also holds up the reality that the Internet can be understood as a kind of location, and the people who gather there as a genuine community. In this way, preaching—and Christ's message—is carried into those ends of the world, just as radio and television once opened up other places. Most importantly, from the perspective of this review essay, the book addresses how technology-enhanced preaching can engage the culture of the Internet and the spiritual needs of those who frequent that virtual space.

The authors also do preachers a great service by incorporating the work of many other homileticians into their analysis of culturally aware homiletic preparation. In particular, the chapter "The Preacher

as Interpreter of Word and World” is a masterful synthesis of decades of thought about how to “read” a congregation or community and prepare a sermon that will be relevant and comprehensible to the intended hearers. Moving swiftly, yet thoroughly, through the work of such thinkers as the philosophers Gadamer and Heidegger and contemporary homiletics like Tisdale, Neiman, and Rogers, we learn how to move beyond self-focused concern for personal meaning to the other-focused gift of preaching in a way that enriches and enlivens whole communities of faith.

Overall, *Ways of the Word* is an excellent place for experienced preachers to begin to expand their sermon preparation beyond what they can see from the window of their study. Preachers who take seriously the advice of Brown and Poverly will discover that their messages have the power not merely to educate and inform people about the Bible and theology, but to take hold of the lives of hearers and transform them into something that only the Spirit could have imagined.

When preachers and hearers are able to acknowledge their similarities and differences honestly, and understand and appreciate them as the interlocking gifts that they are, then the setting of worship is revealed as multicultural, no matter how monocultural it might have seemed before. Indeed, as Eunjo Mary Kim notes in the introduction to her book *Christian Preaching and Worship in Multicultural Contexts*, Christian communities have always been multicultural, at least by some definitions. And that is her first challenge. In a political climate where even the definition of the word *multicultural*, not to mention its value as a societal concept, are potential battlegrounds, she carefully acknowledges major cultural differences and then stakes her ground firmly in the world of multiculturalism as a commitment to improving the world through mutual recognition and valuing of difference. Still, she understands that as a Christian, she cannot simply state such a definition without subjecting it to scrutiny and potential improvement by theology. In fact, such is the work of the rest of the book.

This book identifies itself as practical theology, but it is far more than a collection of tips on preaching in multicultural settings. Kim has constructed a theologically and philosophically rich inquiry into the nature of multicultural Christian communities and the opportunities and requirements that such a community invites. Her book

contains example sermons and liturgies, but to appreciate the masterful way they are put together requires attention to the deep thinking represented by the rest of the book.

The first few chapters set out the theological framework. Kim begins with an inquiry into the theology of diversity itself. Grounding it in trinitarian theology, she discusses diversity as a necessary consequence of God's creation of the world. Following on the essential diversity of creation, she goes on to show how this diversity is a critical component in the continuation of that creation, and how preachers and liturgical leaders can help congregations to embrace *creatio continua* (continual creation) as a component of their worship. She then traces these ideas through premodern and modern understandings of culture, acknowledging that many Christians today retain these conceptions of the value of diversity in culture. For those communities that have embraced postmodern cultural frames, or communities whose leaders want to guide them there, she proceeds to look at the consequences of multicultural hermeneutics for biblical interpretation and liturgical construction.

Kim's chapter on multicultural hermeneutics is a concise and much-needed introduction to the concept. Briefly addressing such traditions as feminist, postcolonial, intertextual, and deconstructionist hermeneutics, she ably makes her case that the era of *sola scriptura* has passed for those committed to multicultural biblical interpretation and that many theological schools are addressing few, if any, of these traditions in an adequate way. Her few paragraphs on each framework do not intend to introduce them in any depth (an impossible task), but rather succeed in their purpose of whetting the appetite of the unfamiliar reader and pointing the way forward through effective bibliographic footnotes. She then proceeds to show a "worked example" of this multicultural biblical interpretation by exegeting one of Jesus' miracles with the tools she describes.

Building on these biblical foundations, Kim then proceeds to the world of liturgy. Again, she engages the postmodern paradigm and considers how it challenges and changes traditional worship practices. She quite carefully situates this current shift in liturgical practice and theology within a context of other constantly changing liturgical practices. Seen in this light, multiculturally aware worship is not a new thing to be feared or resisted, but rather only the latest in a line of ancient, medieval, Reformation-era, and more recent movements

of liturgical renewal. A chapter on metaphorical models for worship practices discusses the melting pot, the mosaic, and Kim's own kaleidoscope model before moving past them all to consider what a liturgical mode of metamorphosis might be like. A chapter on the practice of preparing multicultural liturgies using her techniques closes the substantive chapters of the work, with a collection of appendixes provide several sample sermons and liturgies that show the reader the practical end state of her theological reflections.

Kim's work on multicultural worship and preaching in this book has many strengths, including its broad and deep foundations in the theology and philosophy of diversity and its expression in liturgical action. But perhaps its most valuable quality is the way that it exemplifies its postmodern, multicultural commitments by not rejecting those approaches to diversity and culture that came before it. This is most visible in her discussion of various approaches to multicultural worship. Far from rejecting the melting pot (or its near relative, the salad bowl) metaphor, she acknowledges not simply its weaknesses, but also shows that it is a way that many have entered into consideration of multiculturalism and can itself glorify God in concert with, and by overlapping with, other styles.

For the reader who is prepared to dive into the theological sea that this book contains, it will repay their attention in manifold ways. The reader will come away with a much deeper understanding of how diversity of all kinds can strengthen the church, and the ways that a preacher or liturgical leader can deliberately incorporate and invite that diversity into their worship and preaching life.

Of course, at some point, preaching in multicultural settings will necessarily involve confronting the reality of racism in our society. That is the place where books like Carolyn Helsel's *Anxious to Talk about It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism* should enter the picture. Though Helsel's book is not primarily a preaching text, she is herself the preaching professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. And though it is not intended as a book about race theory, nor race relations, nor even antiracism, it is a work in which a white person intends to spark conversations with and among other white people on the topic of race. Given the segregated reality of many American congregations, this book's advice may be exactly what preachers need when beginning to speak about race and racism in the church and society.

Helsel's method for helping white Christians to talk about race is to encourage telling and listening to stories. The individuality of stories, she says, can help people to get into a conversation on a difficult topic without necessarily having to make larger generalizations that often trigger anxiety. This could be an important lesson for preachers who are looking for ways to engage anxiety-producing topics in their preaching, without inviting defensiveness in the minds and hearts of their hearers. She models this well in her work by telling her own story, and by encouraging her readers to empathize with her and with others whose stories she shares by asking questions designed to encourage perspective taking, questions like "Can you imagine?" or "What would it feel like?"

Perhaps counterintuitively, Helsel argues for gratitude as an effective posture and practice when speaking about race. Here she has left behind primarily political constructions of race relations and firmly set herself in the world of Christian theology. When privileging gratitude, all who participate in the discussion begin with the assumption that they will receive something of value, as in a gift exchange. This is another effective strategy for circumventing anxiety and shame around the topic of race, because it places the conversation within the narrative of hope and grace that comes through reliance on Christ, even in difficult conversations. Of course, people who have, knowingly or unknowingly, participated in systems of oppression will have to come face-to-face with that sin. However, focusing on gratitude for clarity about the past and hope for a more just future can call a person or community to proactive actions when an emphasis on injustice alone cannot.

Yet Helsel is also careful to caution that embracing gratitude is not without risk. Acknowledging that a gift, even when offered in love, is sometimes difficult or impossible to receive, she gently walks her readers through some possible ways to respond without letting the conversational opening slam shut due to hurt or offense. In this way, she gives her readers the great gift of perseverance in the face of internal or external resistance to change.

In her final substantive chapter, Helsel lifts up several traditional spiritual practices with which congregations will be familiar—self-compassion, witnessing, hospitality, and worship—as good locations for conversations about race. This places these conversations in familiar and comforting contexts, and assists in dissipating anxiety on the

topic. Her couple of pages on worship, in particular, show how the signs and symbols of Christian community can serve as a container for people to confront and remake the history and contemporary reality of American race relations within the all-encompassing love of God.

Through this work, Helsel has found a way to do what might seem a tall order, at least, or perhaps even an impossible one. She has given white people a way to talk about the ugly realities of race in contemporary American society in a context suffused with Christ's empathetic, healing, and redemptive love. Following her advice will not magically turn away fear or criticism when raising such a fraught topic, but it will allow the faithful preacher to tell the truth in love, and that's often the best one can do.

The consideration of preaching and culture as a theological, or even a practical, discipline is one thing. Seeing it lived through a life dedicated to Christ and the church is quite another. And it is this aspect of preaching and culture that this final book addresses. *Crossover Preaching: Intercultural-Improvisational Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor*, by Jared Alcántara, is an absolutely brilliant description of an approach to preaching, crossover preaching, that the author believes will become increasingly relevant to the future of the American church, and an important preacher, Gardner Taylor, who exemplifies it. This allows the reader to observe the interplay among theology, homiletics, and the practice of the preaching ministry in a way that is rare outside of such sustained attention to a particular preacher.

The book is also different from many others in that it grounds itself in the demographic changes currently occurring in the United States in terms that are not alarmist, but rather encouraging. The shift in the center of Christian demographics and power from Europe, coupled with the rise in overall population in general and the nonwhite population in particular, is good news for any preacher or community than can bring crossover preaching to bear on the task of evangelism and Christian living. For those of us in the Anglican tradition, such a shift in perspective could end the hand-wringing over dwindling average Sunday attendances and could move our tradition to a more hopeful, evangelistic posture.

Alcántara begins his analysis by describing what he means by crossover preaching. He sees it as a kind of preaching that has two primary characteristics: it is improvisational, and intercultural. In this



way, it is very much in the vein of the other books we have been considering. The principal difference in Alcántara's book is the way it shows the fullness of this preaching style through the life and work of Gardner Taylor. Taylor, one of the most prominent African American preachers of the mid-twentieth century, served as the pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ in New York City for over forty years. At its height, the congregation had nearly fourteen thousand members. When Taylor died in 2015, he had received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and been named many times as one of the most effective preachers in the United States. Alcántara's claim is that Taylor's mastery of crossover preaching is what animated his homiletical style and drew so many people to him and his congregation.

Taylor's crossover preaching was improvisational. For Alcántara, this means that Taylor was willing to move beyond his prepared text when necessary and that he often composed his sermons the way a jazz musician would a song, utilizing a large and varied set of tropes that could be brought in as needed. But for the purposes of addressing the question of preaching and culture, it was Taylor's tendency to adapt his preaching to the congregation to whom he preached and the space where they worshiped. This analysis of Taylor's preaching is particularly new, as it addresses the issue of improvisational performance beyond the question of form and content that the common jazz metaphor uses. Alcántara's analysis of three sermons shows how a close reading of a text can reveal layers that might not be seen at a first pass. These sermons all share a single focus on a text and its interpretation. Variations in the text can be attributed to the context where they were preached. Most striking is the way that Taylor adapts the sermon to attune to the lack of a call and response tradition in a predominantly white Presbyterian church, as differentiated from how he makes good use of the technique in predominantly black congregations.

A complication of Taylor's preaching that Alcántara identifies, and that is quite salient to the topic of preaching and culture, is how Taylor must *transgress* against certain expectations of his preaching, in order to achieve the success at crossing over to other cultures that he intends. This could (and sometimes did) set him at odds with his own community, even as he reached out to bring the gospel to others. In the case of Taylor, he seeks to stretch, and sometimes deliberately to break, the confines of a racialized identity as a "black preacher," and the expectations that come along with that. However, this does

not mean that he rejects it, or even necessarily critiques it. Instead, Taylor allows his blackness to exist as part of his identity, without allowing his ministry or his preaching to be defined by it.

This decentering of Taylor's blackness allows him to operate interculturally. Alcántara considers Taylor's preaching ministry using the theory of intercultural competence. This ability to operate outside of Taylor's own culture allows him to preach the gospel to those who are unlike him, without having to reject or change anything about his own identity. For Alcántara, this decentered identity is essential to crossover preaching.

To conclude his book, Alcántara generates some practical lessons from Taylor's preaching that can help a preacher to be a more effective crossover preacher. This section, while excellent, is so solidly grounded in the ideas and examples given before that it should not be considered without the rest of the book.

Alcántara's analysis of Gardner Taylor's preaching is a fitting summary to all of the thinking on the subject of culture and preaching these four works represent. Sally Brown and Luke Powery reflect on the ways in which understanding one's own cultural identity and social location is constructed and performed. This is a necessary step in understanding where one fits in a multicultural reality. Eunjoo Mary Kim shows her readers that a world made up of people aware of their own cultural location, but also aware of and appreciative of others and their differences, opens up possibilities that would otherwise be impossible. Carolyn Helsel invites white preachers and their communities to engage this world of difference with gratitude and faith rather than anxiety. And finally, Jared Alcántara, with the example of Gardner Taylor, illustrates the possibility and power of such culturally aware and culturally unbound preaching. Together these works represent a path of hope and grace for preachers proclaiming the kingdom of God in these challenging and changing times.