

Nuts and Bolts of Culture-Sensitized Sermons

Vic Anderson
Dallas Theological Seminary
Dallas, Texas

VAnderson@DTS.edu

Abstract: Every preaching event is affected by the interplay of three distinct cultures: the culture of the preacher, diverse multiple cultures of the listeners, and the culture of the specific local church. Preachers seeking to be audience-focused must engage all three strata of culture and consciously adapt multiple elements of their sermons. These adaptations range from cultural accommodation to cultural confrontation. In this paper, the author draws from the fields of missiology, cultural anthropology, and socio-linguistics as well as from his extensive experience preaching at an international church attended by people from over 40 countries. The paper focuses on five specific areas of sermons where sensitivity to multiple cultures could impact sermon design and delivery.

Introduction

Homileticians have before them a fascinating array of theoretical questions concerning the relationships of culture to preaching. There are questions about definitions of culture, and whether or not culture is to be viewed as positive, neutral, or negative (Lingenfelter 1998; 2008; Lingenfelter and Mayers 1986). There are distinctions between deep culture and surface culture as well as culture's constituent parts, namely, worldview, beliefs, and behaviors (Hiebert 2008). Some attempt to develop methods for analyzing culture, whether diachronically, synchronically, at a macro-level, a micro-level, or congregation-specific level.¹ Others address the relationship of Christianity to culture, that is, when to accommodate culture, when to confront culture, when to transform culture, when to withdraw from culture, and a host of options in between. Such theoretical concerns appear to be gaining importance for preachers and professors of preaching.²

This paper acknowledges the fundamental importance of these theoretical issues for the field of homiletics. However, my intention here is to take as a starting point the practical implications of shaping a sermon rather than these theoretical issues. In other words, this essay assumes that the preacher knows something of the culture(s) of his specific audience and is ready to adapt the sermon accordingly. At issue for this preacher is, "What can I adapt?" The short answer to that question is that since every element of logos, ethos, and pathos is judged by the audience, every element of the sermon must be adapted to that audience.³ While that answer may be true, it provides little guidance for the preacher wrestling with sermon design as the clock ticks toward Sunday. The following pages draw attention to five points where cultural sensitivity may be reflected in sermon design. These practical suggestions intentionally grapple with the nuts and bolts of modifying sermon details as the preacher is informed by cultural features of the audience. The list of suggestions is far from exhaustive; rather, it is a starting point for moving from audience analysis to specifics of sermon design.

Sermon Adaptations

1. The Pre-Introduction

Classical rhetoric posits that ethos develops both before and during the speaker's presentation (Hogan and Reid 1999, 53-65). Prior to the actual start of the sermon, an audience begins the process of judging the speaker. The preacher therefore must determine how the audience will assess him as a good person, an individual worth listening to, and then provide good reasons through the Pre-introduction for the audience to assess him positively. This subconscious assessment by the audience depends on how the preacher measures up to the listeners' conception of what makes a good preacher (Anderson 2008). On one hand, the good (ideal) preacher could be positioned as trusted friend and guide or coach. This may include the idea of preacher as informed teacher and even co-learner. On the other hand, the good preacher could be positioned in the audience's mind as a channel for God's voice, a prophetic individual who comes with spiritual power. Of course, there are multiple variations on these two options. The point here is that several elements of the Pre-introduction may be impacted based on the answer to this question about the ideal preacher. For example, assuming that another individual introduces the speaker, that person will want to emphasize those elements of the preacher that predispose the audience toward a positive ethos. If the ideal preacher is viewed as a credible teacher, the introduction might mention schools attended, degrees attained, publications, etc. to demonstrate academic credibility and affirm that the preacher is a good individual because of his academic accomplishments. On the other hand, where the ideal preacher is to be seen as having spiritual power and prophetic voice, the introduction to that preacher would not mention academic accomplishments. Doing so may well reduce ethos. Rather, the introduction should emphasize spiritual qualities, perhaps even indicating that God has sent the preacher to this congregation at this time. In this situation, the audience is drawn to a speaker who overcame obstacles to come to them and present a message from God. The audience thinks more highly of this speaker if it can be shown that he is close to God functions as His servant.

Multiple other factors come into play in the Pre-introduction. Factors may include whether or not the preacher greets the audience, how long the greeting is, and what is said in the greeting. In some cultures, a short greeting is considered a rude brushing aside of the audience. In other cultures, a long personal greeting is considered a waste of the listeners' time. They want to hear the teacher's ideas more than feel his spirituality. At issue is the proper way (as culturally defined) for a preacher to establish relationship with the audience. Similar comments could be made about clothing (shirt tail in or out, tie on or off or loosened in a workman-like fashion, jacket on or off, etc.), and shoes (polished versus casual). Even whether one uses a pulpit, music stand, or no stand at all communicates differently from one audience to another.

2. Overall Sermon Design and Style

In this section, we consider a few elements that extend throughout the sermon presentation. Whether or not to structure the sermon inductively or deductively is a function primarily of audience appeal, not structure of the text.⁴ A more science-oriented audience may prefer an inductive approach, especially if the speaker has less credibility on a topic and that topic may be opposed by the listeners. African or African-American churches, on the other hand, often have a

preference for deductive arrangement, perhaps because of the ease with which vocal audience participation can be included with increased clarity of the deductive arrangement.

Another issue rippling through the sermon deals with approach to the text. Some audiences (more frequently in the West) view the text as far removed from their contemporary lives. There is a large gap to overcome between text and us. Others see a complete collapse of the biblical and contemporary horizons, feeling that the Bible is written directly to them. A preacher who honors cultural distance between text and us by emphasizing, “God spoke to them,” (referring to the Israelites, Romans, Corinthians, or other recipient of the Biblical text) runs the risk of alienating an audience that already feels a closeness to God by reading the Bible directly. Likewise, a preacher who collapses Biblical and contemporary horizons by emphasizing, “what God says to us in the Bible,” runs the risk of alienating an audience that is attuned to text-us distance. For such an audience, a direct reading of the text devalues biblical history and literary analysis.

A third element in this section relates to style and tone of the sermon. If a preacher knows that an audience values high volume, a quick pace, and an embellished style, the sermon can be designed for these characteristics to recur throughout. Likewise, a contemplative, exploratory tone can be built into sermon design. Kennedy (1998) recognizes that some cultures expect formal speech, with its high degree of coding and distancing of the speaker from the audience. Some of the formality may be carried in terms such as “Reverend” (as opposed to pastor, bishop, brother, or priest), “Eucharist” (as opposed to communion or Lord’s Table) or “sanctuary” (as opposed to auditorium or worship center). Employing the preferences of an audience and then employing those preferences throughout the sermon helps the preacher heighten ethos.

Another sermon adaptation related to style comes with accommodation for people who are listening to a sermon that is not delivered in their mother tongue. In these situations, preachers increase ethos (and perhaps clarity as well) by sprinkling in key words in the mother tongue of listeners. For example, many 2nd and 3rd generation Hispanics speak Spanglish, a mixture of English and Spanish. It provides them with a cultural identity distinct from their homeland but connected to it. Advertisers have found that television commercials and print media can be more effective when utilizing this Spanish – English hybrid. Likewise, a preacher might select key words from the text or in an illustration and use the mother tongue language of the listeners. My personal observation is that by using a few Amharic words and phrases at key points in sermons I delivered in Ethiopia, I gained increased interest from and connection with the native Amharic speakers. The preacher moves one step closer to being an insider.

3. Introductions

Opening moments of a sermon normally are designed to arrest attention and surface need. The former goal often is pursued by use of an image whose concrete nature captures the imagination of listeners. The ideal image also provides an easy bridge to the establishment of need or statement of the Main Idea. Such an image also must fit, or at least not offend, the culture of the audience. Consider two examples from real sermons I delivered in recent months. In a sermon on hell, I wanted an opening image that would illustrate how people can be deceived in thinking that moving forward is good, even when the movement actually brings them closer to destruction. When the sermon was delivered at a small Bible church in Dallas, I crafted an opening image set

in Nazi Germany. In this image, Jews willingly climbed into box cars that would take them to concentration camps for execution. They eagerly left the ghetto thinking that there was good in front of them, but the good turned out to be destruction in the gas chambers. A few months later I was to preach this sermon at an international church in Ethiopia. In the congregation of 1500 people, I knew that some parishioners would certainly call Germany home and others were Jews by birth. The effects of a holocaust-oriented opening image on those groups of people were unpredictable, and I could not risk alienating these people at the outset of the sermon. So I changed the opening image to one more compatible with life in Ethiopia. The new opening image featured a skit involving a family traveling by train. In this humorous drama, all family members slowly left the train as they heard repeated warnings of a bridge out. The husband ignored the warnings and fell into the ravine. As a skit, the mini-drama was well received, bringing focus on the need in a humorous analogous manner.

A second example of adapting a sermon's image to connect to culture illustrates the pervasiveness of Western media in the non-Western world. In a recent sermon on Genesis 6, I needed an opening image that would orient the audience to mankind's desire to go beyond his God-given boundaries. After much pondering, I recalled how Buzz Lightyear had just this kind of desire in the movie Toy Story. Buzz sought to be a real Space Ranger, not just a toy in Andy's room. The image was perfect – except for the fact that I would be speaking in Ethiopia, far away from the reach of Pixar animated films. Or so I thought! I consulted with several people from the congregation and was repeatedly told that most people in the international church had seen the film and would connect with the image. I went forward with the Toy Story image, fearful that I would violate cultural sensitivities. Yet, true to my investigation, the congregation welcomed the image enthusiastically and it accomplished the purpose I intended. In this case, adapting the sermon to the culture meant using an image that I originally thought would fail to connect with the audience. Its success was due in part to the reach of Western media through various avenues of distribution around the world.

Perhaps even more critical than in the opening image, sermons must adapt to culture when surfacing need. It is hard to overestimate the importance of cultural sensitivity in this initial touch upon relevance. In this case, the culture under consideration is often the cultures of society in which Christians must express their faith. The preacher must understand how the cultural context of the world impacts members of the congregation and then devise appropriate sermon adaptations for surfacing need. In the previously mentioned sermon from Genesis 6, I had to move from the attention-getting image of Buzz Lightyear to the real life temptations of people to step beyond their God-given positions as human beings. How are people tempted by their worlds to engage in such God-defying activity? Complicating the challenge in this sermon setting was the fact that the audience ranged from traditional animistic Ethiopians to well-educated modernized westerners. The solution came in surfacing need at two extremes related to creation of super-humans. For the animist, I described the compelling lure of going to a medicine man (witch doctor) to invoke the common practice of gaining a special potion or prayer that would cause a child to grow more intelligent or more beautiful than his or her peers. With the assistance of a medicine man, parents could help their child overcome natural limitations. For the westerners in the crowd, this illustration would be fascinating at best and amusing at worst. To surface the same need in this cultural context, I described the lure of genetic engineering. The hope of manipulating DNA is that the process can help us overcome the limitations of our humanity and create super-humans. These examples demonstrate that a similar need extends

across cultures but expression of that need must be adapted to cultural specifics. In this case, both cultures experience the lure of overcoming human limitations by stepping beyond God-given boundaries. Yet this temptation is expressed through consulting a medicine man in one culture and through consulting a genetics specialist in the other.

4. Explanation of the Biblical Text

Every expository sermon devotes some of its air time to explanation of the Biblical text. Cultural sensitivity demands that preachers adjust both the extent of that explanation and the method of explanation to the characteristics of our church culture. For example, consider a sermon from Ephesians 1 where the word “adoption” is found in the text. In a North American context where adoption is common, little explanation of the practice is needed. The preacher could move quickly into connotations associated with the word picture. If that same text was being addressed to a rural Ethiopian audience, a significant amount of explanation would be needed as the closest equivalent to the concept actually works against the Biblical meaning. In rural Ethiopia, an “adopted” child is called a “bread child,” that is, one who works in the family for bread and a place to sleep. On some occasions, adoption becomes a metaphor for legalized child slave labor. What a far cry from the Biblical ideal! A similar phenomenon may occur when Americans try to envision the meaning of Shepherd. In this cultural context, shepherds are virtually nonexistent, resulting in a romanticized image of the gentle shepherd who spends time joyfully carrying and soothing his compliant pet-like sheep. In reality, sheep are dirty, stinky, stubborn, and prone to wandering away from the flock. Shepherds must be strong protectors of sheep, perhaps even driving them to the place they need to be. Congregants who brush up with sheep every day need little explanation. North Americans may need a great deal of assistance for their accurate comprehension.

Preachers also might consider adapting to the culture their methods of explaining the Biblical text. Some church cultures are characterized by an atmosphere of intense Bible study. This is evidenced in a high percentage of congregants carrying Bibles, notebooks, and pens. They are literate and anticipate definitions and cross-referencing. They love connecting Biblical ideas from one part of the Bible to another. In such settings, preachers will want to demonstrate clearly how their ideas are from the text. Whether backing up narrative texts with epistolary units or illustrating non-narrative texts with didactic ones, preachers do well in this cultural context to satisfy audience demands for proofs directly from the broad sweep of scripture. Alternatively, some audiences are less concerned about study of the text and more concerned with experiencing God’s presence. In such contexts, preachers need to invest in more connections with contemporary life and argument than with cross references and definitions. Where literacy is minimal and few people carry Bibles with them, cross-referencing ideas may have little value.

5. Applications

In this final area we examine how cultural sensitivity affects spheres of applications as well as consideration of ethics. Preachers serious about application naturally begin with spheres close to their own lives. Often it is not far from a preacher’s own spheres of application to those of many in his congregation. But as the cultural spheres become different, applicational spheres must as well. In my own life, I may link application to playing golf, eating a family meal, caring for my yard, or sitting contentedly with my dog. These areas have extensive overlap with people in my

Dallas church. Each of these areas, however, is unfamiliar to people in the cultural context of an African rural church. Golf, of course, is completely foreign, and many people have never even seen the sport. Tiger Woods is not a media giant everywhere in the world. While most residents of Dallas engage regular battles with fire ants and crab grass to keep their lawns appealing, their African counterparts may have little sense of performing weekly lawn care. A dog may be labeled “man’s best friend” in America, but in Ethiopia dogs are bred to be vicious and serve a function of guarding one’s property. Such beasts are meant to strike fear in people, not curl up on one’s lap or hop in the back seat of the family sedan for a trip to the store. Even the practice of a family meal looks different in cultures where children do not eat at the same time as parents. Of course, examples could be multiplied endlessly. The point is that spheres of application are heavily influenced by culture, and preachers must learn well the cultures where they seek to effectively apply their sermons.

Beyond the sphere of applications, ethics themselves are culturally conditioned (Adeney 1995). Ethics particularly regarding use of money are strongly conditioned by culture (Maranz 2001). A brief example is worth considering. North American Christians state their love for truth and their hatred for lying. Deception is nearly always wrong and transparency is normally good. These values would hold true even if it brought emotional pain into a situation. Applications that line up with this cultural value are generally given assent. In Ethiopia, however, there is a long-standing appreciation for proper use of deception. Deception is honored when it is skillfully employed to promote a greater good. As witnessed in the phenomenon of Wax and Gold, wisdom may even be carried forward in a shroud of deception. This value is often at work in the dynamics of relaying bad news to loved ones. Although one may know that a friend’s mother has died, the report given will be that she is sick. This aberration from the truth would be considered the properly loving thing to do. Only the closest family member could relay such terrible news about the family matriarch. Clearly, cultural dynamics are at work in circumscribing ethics. A preacher may decide that this kind of practice violates Biblical norms for truth-telling and must be confronted. If so, he will want to approach the application with a full understanding of how the cultural dynamics work. Without that sensitivity, the application could be more destructive than helpful.

Conclusion

Culturally-sensitized preaching touches a wide variety of sermon design issues. The five areas listed above only begin to address some of the design issues. Further, each of the design issues above can be explored more deeply. However, armed even with this brief list of touchpoints, preachers can begin to move beyond analysis of culture to actual modification of sermon design. Homileticians are not students of culture so that they might better talk about cultural dynamics. Rather, they are students of church cultures and of broader societal cultures so that their sermons will have the greatest impact possible for the glory of God.

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Endnotes

¹ For a proposal on analyzing congregations as speech communities, see the author's article entitled, "Tuning Sermons for Different Ears: Help for Sermon Design from Socio-linguistics" in a forthcoming issue of Trinity Journal.

² A moment's reflection provides several reasons why concerns over culture are gaining importance. (1) Around the world, impacts of instant communication and increased travel bring rapid change to many cultures, particularly in urban and suburban settings. (2) Preachers increasingly find themselves preaching into many cultures, especially with the explosion of technologies that bring a sermon in one location to a world-wide audience. (3) With the ease of travel, many preachers are addressing widely divergent audiences, often faced with the challenge of adapting a sermon from one audience to another. (4) Professors of preaching find themselves addressing students from multiple countries who will be returning to vastly different cultural contexts. These four dynamics intensify the need to understand how culture impacts preaching.

³ The assumption here is that exegesis is not subject to cultural considerations other than (1) the exegete becoming aware of his or her own cultural biases, and (2) the exegete's commitment to examining the text as situated in specific biblical cultural contexts.

⁴ Hogan and Reid (1999, 123-135) provide four major structural arrangements for sermons. Selection of an arrangement is based on the preacher's perception of how the audience assesses argument. Though the authors do not develop this, it is understood that cultural factors play a role in audience expectations.