

*What Makes Preaching “Missional”?**

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Allow me to begin by making the following disclaimers. First, I am not a homiletician. My Christian vocation is to be a teacher in the area of world Christianity, mission, history of religions, and intercultural studies. I write this article hoping to contribute insights and perspectives from these areas to the theology and practice of preaching. Second, homiletics was not a strong discipline during my theological formation in Puerto Rico. As a result, I was formed as a preacher in and by the congregations that nourished my faith. I learned to preach by listening and observing my pastors—two of them considered to be very good preachers among the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico—and later by listening to and integrating the suggestions and critique of my parishioners. This was not an easy task. However, I believe I received the best possible training in the congregations—maybe even better than that received in seminary.

This article is not about how to preach a sermon during a “mission emphasis week,” nor is it about how to motivate people for missional engagement through the practice of preaching. This article is not about the relationship between mission and preaching, nor is it an argument on the missional nature of preaching.¹ This article is about *what makes preaching missional*. Instead of defining missional preaching on the basis of theological foundations and biblical references, I want to explore *how contextual conditions, dynamics, and interactions serve as leaven for a congregation to practice missional preaching*.

I can only begin my exploration of missional preaching by wrestling with the contextual conditions, dynamics, and interactions with which I am most familiar: those of Third World Christianity. Historians and missiologists agree that Christianity finds itself growing and maturing in the southern continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.² There, Christianity faces theological, ecclesial, and missional challenges similar to the ones faced by the early church.³ These challenges, which emerge out of the interaction of faith and context, become indicators of the vitality of the Christian faith. The faith’s bloodline is energized as the Christian religion crosses all types of boundaries—geographical, cultural, religious—and interacts with those realities. The Christian struggle to bring the faith to bear on the daily life of God’s people becomes the hermeneutical key to understanding the vitality of the faith. This struggle is, in my opinion, what makes the missiological and theological endeavor so rich in the southern continents.⁴ Consequently, this struggle should be the *sine qua non* of preaching, particularly missional preaching.

I develop this article as follows: first, I explore the relationship between the vitality of the Christian faith in the Third World and its context, focusing on the interaction between faith, congregational life, and daily life. Second, I give an example of how some of the contextual realities provide rich and challenging resources for missional reflection and preaching. Third, I illustrate the struggle, interplay, and crossings which

* This article was translated from Spanish by Melanie Mitchell, a senior M.Div. student at Columbia Theological Seminary.

have the potential to nurture the vitality of the faith in Third World and North American congregations. Finally, I return to the question, *What makes preaching missional?* and propose some suggestions for preachers and congregations in the North American context.

The Vitality of Christianity: What Makes It Happen?

Ask yourself the following questions: Can you identify within your family background—grandparents, great-grandparents, etc.—any person whose faith is non-Christian? Can you identify within your family background any radical social class differences? Can you identify within your family background radical ideological differences—not the traditional, predominant conservative/liberal categories of the United States, but radically different positions such as *laissez faire* capitalism and socialism? I have met very few people in the mainstream United States who can identify family members who could answer these questions in the affirmative.⁵ Most Christians' family members are also Christian, or at least claim sympathy with Christianity, and most belong to the same social class, and most have a common core of beliefs that shape and support the present political system and government structure. It seems that family history is reasonably steady and consistent, especially if some of the "unfortunate mixing" of family members is well hidden (I believe that some of those hidden stories hold a reservoir of growth that we seldom find in our uncovered life and stories).

Most Third World Christians find themselves answering these questions with a resounding YES! Christians in the southern continents work, eat, and relate on a daily basis with people of other faiths, of different ethnic backgrounds, of different social classes, of different ideologies. Moreover, congregations are grappling, intentionally or unintentionally, with the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it interacts with the diversity described above.

The interaction of the Christian faith with other historical, cultural, social, and political realities is due to the communal/corporate character of life in the southern continents. Here, the life of faith is not isolated from the dynamics of daily life, though in the Christian faith, one's multiple religious, cultural, and social experiences may be different. Faith is in constant interaction, penetrating and being penetrated by daily *praxis*.⁶ Thus, the vitality of Christianity in the southern continents is due to the interaction of the faith with the multiple factors of life. Faith and life are intrinsically related.

We could ask whether perhaps the faith in the West is not related to diverse factors in daily life as well. Certainly it is. However, the relationship is not the same. First, as I have already indicated, the Christian faith in the West tends to assume its own context to be either Christian or secular/capitalist—traditionally considered an ally of the faith in some circles, or at least an enemy whose benefits can be enjoyed. Frequently the Christian faith finds itself either completely tied to culture, or at least in the religious dimension, claiming to be totally isolated from culture.⁷ This cultural dynamic does not permit a critical interaction in which the gospel modifies daily life and daily life *modifies the gospel*.⁸

On the other hand, the profoundly individualistic and compartmentalized nature of the dominant culture in North America presumes an autonomy and independence that obstructs the possibility of cultural and religious interaction and interpenetration.

Goizueta identifies the conditions that create an ideology of isolation that limits the interaction of the gospel with the context:

Unless the human person is no more than a billiard ball, that openness to universality presupposes an intellectual, as well as an affective and ethical-political openness beyond one's particular lived experience. If community is the *source* of individuality, then the possibility of transcending one's individual experience and one's own "truth" is *presupposed* in human praxis. *Only if the individual, or the "social location," is autonomous and self-sufficient can the possibility of incommensurable human experiences and incommensurable "truths" or "meanings" even arise.*⁹

Such a proposition, as difficult as it can be for North American Christians to accept, is unquestionable.¹⁰

Moreover, in some missional circles, particularly in the West, questions arise as to the missional character of congregations and the recovery of the church's place in the public arena. Such missiology is based on the cultural transformations—particularly post modernity—that create a hostile environment for the Christian faith. The inquietudes and missional reflections continue to be restricted to the relationship between the gospel and culture in the contemporary context, with very little historical, sociological, phenomenological, and anthropological analysis. There is no doubt that these colleagues articulate an imperative for the North American (Mexico not included) churches. Nevertheless, an intercultural dialogue will enrich the cultural, social, and political questions and facilitate the theological reflection on the *existential praxis*. This dialogue will also provide insights as to what *existential resources* motivate or frustrate interaction with the Christian faith.¹¹

The above assumes that the Christian faith, together with multiple cultural, social, and political realities, has the capacity to form the personal and communal biography of the people of God. For example, the struggle for daily bread or the challenge of interacting daily with neighbors who profess another faith creates a unique relational dynamic¹² that generates reflection on the faith that goes further than the traditional parameters of Western theological reflection (the Bible, tradition, denominational polity, etc.). Here I want to emphasize that I am not referring to experience as a criterion for theological reflection—much has been said about this—but rather to *the interaction between faith and life*, the mutual penetration of realities which form *the existential praxis of the faith*.

Perhaps an example will help to clarify my argument. Recently, my World Religions class at Columbia Theological Seminary visited a Muslim center of the Ismaili tradition. This tradition, though one of the most liberal within the Islamic faith, does not permit non-Muslims to enter the sanctuary where the congregation gathers for prayer. I instructed my students about this in advance so as not to create false expectations before our visit to the Ismaili center. On the day of our visit, after an introductory talk about the Islamic faith and particularly about the Ismaili tradition, the president of the center invited us to tour the facilities. When we arrived at the doors of the prayer sanctuary, the president of the center invited, yes invited, us to enter "this most holy place." My students and I hesitated, not knowing how to respond to such an invitation. We knew that it was prohibited for us to enter the prayer sanctuary. On

the other hand, the president of the center was the one extending the invitation. In fact, the president and our other hosts had to insist before we would enter. Afterwards, we returned to the reception area of the center where our hosts fed us lunch. As we shared bread, the leaders of the center, and particularly the president, asked themselves how such a thing had happened. How was it possible that a group of Christian students and their professor had entered the prayer sanctuary of the Ismaili center?

I cannot isolate this experience from my theological, missional, and ministerial reflections. My faith reflections cannot reduce this experience to an isolated biographical fact, especially *knowing* the religious tradition with which the encounter took place. Moreover, this experience is formative for those persons who live out *an existential intercultural and inter-religious praxis*. In my case, some of those persons who offered us hospitality in the Ismaili center are physicians at the closest medical center to my home. At Christmas I bought some gifts in a shop whose owners are members of the Ismaili center—my clue to discovering this being the name of Allah written in calligraphy on the shop window. This experience is therefore part of my human and communal formation. In other words, this experience is not restricted to novelty, the temporal, or the accidental, but rather inserts itself into my human and *faith* development, obligating me to reflect upon the interaction of my Christian faith with the Muslims of the Ismaili center in Decatur, Georgia, where I live.

An Intercultural/Inter-religious Example in Biblical Reflection

The problem of *justice* is at the center of Christian faith. The tradition of the prophets is rich in its call for justice for the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers in the land. The missional action of Jesus, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, was one of justice (Lk. 4). However, the comprehension of justice in the West, with its Judeo-Christian legacy, blurs our biblical and theological study and reflection about justice. Normally, even among the Christian community, justice means “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

The concept of justice in other cultural and religious traditions can shed light on biblical and theological reflection about Christian justice. Obviously, the first step is to *recognize* the value that exists in the religious and cultural task of other groups—the *non-deficiency* of the theological reflection of other religions. Once we overcome this obstacle, we can begin the arduous process of finding theological and cultural resources that, though different from ours, intersect with the questions we ask in our faith and daily lives. We cannot discover these resources by mere osmosis, for they are often hidden from view or covered by our theological myopia. They are born out of our own living interaction, out of our *existential praxis*, out of the relationship between faith and daily life.

For example, the presence of Korean and Chinese brothers and sisters in our seminary requires a basic exposition of the elements that form their cultural and Christian identity. Among these elements, the Confucian philosophy is vital. On the other hand, the Asian population that the seminary serves is suspicious of Christian traditions of liberation and of the exploration in other religious sources to enrich the Christian faith. In my reflection about Christian justice and in my intercultural dialogue with my brothers and sisters from the East, however, I have discovered Confucian philosophy to be a resource that clarifies the concept of Christian justice.

Confucius' disciple said to him, “We have heard people say that you should return

good for evil. What do you say?” Confucius answered, “If you return good for evil, what will you return for good? No, do not return good for evil. Return good for good, and return justice for evil.”¹³ It is clear that the definition of justice with which Confucius provided his student is compatible with the definitions of justice of the rabbinical tradition, of the West, and of many Christians. Evil is paid with justice, not with good! To repay evil with good confuses the social order and breaks the contract of equity that characterizes modern democratic societies.

Nevertheless, the gospel postulates something quite different, especially in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-45. The new law: “you know that it was said...but now I say to you...” is an imperative to live with compassion. The gospel calls us to overcome a law that, by its own nature, postulates violence as a juridical solution. Likewise, the declaration of Confucius serves as a mirror to evoke our own principles of justice, those that on occasion we have confused with the gospel. Confucius, therefore, clarifies the gospel and mission in our western context!

So....What is Missional Preaching?

Missional preaching is a ministerial, personal, and communal action in which the congregation listens and discerns the testimony of the Christian people in their struggle with and participation in the activity of God in the world. This definition can be confused with the following declaration: Missional preaching is a ministerial, personal and communal action, in which the congregation listens and discerns the activity of God in the world. This latter declaration assumes the autonomy of the congregation in the action of discernment and lacks a recognition of context and social location. But the first definition, particularly the phrases “the testimony of the Christian people” and “their struggle with and participation in” points to the centrality of *existential praxis* and context in missional preaching.

Now, it is in this *existential praxis* that the intersection with multiple dimensions of life occurs. It is in the *existential praxis* that we relate to persons of other cultures and religions, face the injustices and incongruences of life, and are confronted with the ambiguity and fragility of our actions. It is in this vital space that we celebrate the triumphs and grieve the failures, that we listen to news that disheartens us and other news that gives us hope. In this vital space we eat and share bread or waste the food that so many need; we love passionately and hate that which threatens us. In this vital space CEO’s decide between the work of many and downsizing to increase the earnings of their corporations; blue-collar workers decide between maintaining their salaries or going on strike to gain greater benefits. This space of *existential praxis* is the resource of missional preaching.

But more is needed than a good resource for missional preaching. The key is found in the form in which the gospel interacts with the *existential praxis* and the context in which it lives. Missional preaching arises when the congregation reflects on “their struggle with and their participation in the activity of God in the world.” It is then that the *existential praxis* is converted into the testimony of the people of God. There is testimony when life—daily life—interacts with faith. Preaching is missional when the *existential praxis*, the Christian faith—with all its historical, theological, and ministerial wealth—and the struggle and participation of the people of God in the activity of God converge to provide a testimony that is always submitted to the scrutiny of the community of faith. In this sense, missional preaching is contingent; it only depends

on our faith and our dependence on God. It is a tentative preaching; provisional, temporal, but sustained by the discernment and activity of a people that struggles to be faithful to God.

This is an important aspect of our proposal. Missional preaching is contingent since it is not only the result of what we communicate about the gospel but also ponders how the gospel is received. This is the character of a testimony: it is always submitted to the scrutiny of others. Furthermore, this peculiarity of the contingency of missional preaching is born out of the knowledge and experience that all that is preached is not the gospel. Therefore, missional preaching is tentative, yet assertive.

In the context of the mainline Protestant churches in North America, missional preaching is an invitation to humility in the process of communicating the gospel. The interaction between *existential praxis* and faith not only demands that we ask how we communicate the testimony of faith but also makes necessary the question of how the testimony was received both by the community of faith and the community at large.

Second, missional preaching is informed by the daily life of the people of God. Very possibly the wealth of the daily life of the people of God is submerged in the intimacy of a people accustomed to not sharing inquietudes and religious experiences outside of the traditional parameters of the faith.¹⁴ For example, faith has nothing to do with the manner in which a Christian develops a beautiful friendship with a person of another faith. The friendship with this religious stranger is not assumed to be an activity of God, but rather a simple existential accident or an opportunity for conversion. Congregations need to create spaces to permit discernment and participation in the activity of God and to create testimony in the community. Consequently, missional preaching should provide the opportunities for the personal testimony of the members of a congregation to be translated into the collective testimony of the people of God. This requires that we create new liturgical structures that permit us to listen to and see the testimony of the people of God in their context.

Finally, missional preaching is in itself an exercise of testimony. It is the testimony of a community of faith which struggles and participates with God in the world. The community discerns, in a contingent and tentative manner, but with faith and confidence, the interaction of the Spirit of Christ in all of creation. This testimony witnesses to the realities and struggles that emerge out of this interaction, and to the manner in which life confronts us with challenges that need the power of a living faith.

Notes

¹ Osvaldo Mottesi's book *Predicación y Misión* (Logoi, 1989), is an interesting didactic book that deals with the relationship between mission and preaching. The book has become an important resource for Latin American and Hispanic-Latino pastors and theologians.

² See David B. Barrett ed., *World Christianity Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900 to 2000* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

³ For an interesting study in the similarities between Early Christianity and Contemporary African Christianity see Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

⁴ See also Andrew Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for the Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21.4 (October 1997): 146-153 and "Christianity in the Non-Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion" *Studies in World Christianity* 1.1 (1995): 1-23.

⁵ Most exceptions are from African-American, Asian American or Native American groups.

⁶ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 153-154.

⁷ For a thorough account of this missiological situation in the West see Newbigin, *The Gospel in a*

Pluralistic Society (Grand Rapids & Geneva: Eerdmanns & WCC, 1989).

⁸ See Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 47-80.

⁹ Goizueta, 153-154, emphasis is mine.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 31-41.

¹¹ I refer to the publications of the GOCN group, particularly *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, Eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1996) and *Missional Church*, ed. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns), 1998.

¹² Goizueta, 154.

¹³ Analects of Confucius, Book 14, Chapter 36.

¹⁴ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).