# WHEN PREACHING STYLES MEET: WHAT AFRICAN AND WESTERN PREACHERS CAN LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

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Preaching is a privilege and at the same time hard work. It requires as John Stott has pointed out careful preparation, sincerity, earnestness, courage and humility.[1] Humble preachers recognise that their style of preaching is only one of many. Failure to do so can easily make their preaching less effective, particularly when they preach among those who are culturally different from themselves. This is a lesson learned the hard way by many African church planters in Europe and Western missionaries who serve on the African continent.[2] A one fits it all approach to preaching usually does not work, as the following scenario, which is fictitious but based on real cases, illustrates:

*A British preacher was invited by a Western mission organisation to run a series of preaching workshops for African church leaders in a southern African country. On previous visits to this country, he had noticed that the sermons preached in the local churches were almost exclusively non-expository topical sermons. Coming from an evangelical church tradition that highly valued expository preaching, he concluded that a change in the churches' practice was needed. To bring about such a change was a long term project and it had to start with the training of pastors. He, therefore, decided that the focus of his preaching classes should be expository preaching. While the African pastors generally appreciated the new preaching style, especially the fact that they could see how a particular passage fitted into the big picture of the Bible, they perceived the sermons preached by the guest from Europe as dry and lacking relevance for their daily lives. In addition, they felt uncomfortable that the British preacher seemed to be unwilling to deal with topical sermons in his workshops. The African church leaders had the impression that their traditional way of preaching was considered inferior by their visitor and as a result, many of them reverted to the preaching of topical sermons after the end of the training.*

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1 See J. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp. 211-328.

2 Cf. A. Moyo, 'Church-Planting Considerations for African Reverse Missionaries in Britain in the Postmodern Era', in *African Voices: Towards African British Theologies*, ed. by I. O. Olofinjana (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), pp. 75-78.

## CONTEXT MATTERS

The British preacher rightly grasped the central role which preaching should play in the life and mission of the church. It does not take us long to see that the biblical authors leave us with no doubt that preaching was central to Jesus' earthly ministry and that of the apostles. When Jesus started his ministry he said to his disciples: 'Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come' (Mark 1:38). Likewise, following Pentecost, the apostles continued with the preaching of the good news. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul, for example, writes about his motivation: 'Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). In Acts 6:4 the twelve underline the primacy of preaching when they declare that they will continue to give their 'attention to prayer and the ministry of the word'.

The British preacher also recognised the great value of an expository sermon, which Bryan Chapell defines as,

> A message whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text, and that explains the features and context of the text in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text.[3]

However, by insisting on one particular preaching style, he inadvertently sent out a message of theological superiority - a message which did not convince or endear his approach to his African students. By preaching expository sermons in the style he preached them in his home church in the UK, the preacher also ignored the difference in church culture which existed between urban Britain and rural Africa, and the need to contextualise his sermon message. He presented the gospel in a way that was first and foremost culturally relevant to himself and less so to the African pastors.

## THE CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The British preacher came from a church which had a strong low-context orientation. In low- context churches, the sermons are usually, as James Plueddemann points out, expository sermons which 'concentrate on what the Bible says and less on the immediate felt needs of the people'.[4] The

[3] B. Chapell, *Christ-Centred Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 31.

[4] J. E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), p. 87.

sermons are logically structured and usually delivered in a calm and dignified manner. They are usually verse-by-verse expositions of a particular biblical passage.[5] Verse-by-verse expository preachers often go consecutively through a biblical book.[6] The worship service in low-context churches typically follows a certain order and starts and finishes precisely at the set times.[7] The accompanying songs and hymns tend to contain good biblical theology and often focus on the attributes of God and the work of Christ.

Most of the African churches the British preacher had visited and to which his workshop participants belonged were high-context churches. High context-churches prefer topical sermons that draw on the Scriptures but seek to address the present needs of the hearers.[8] The preachers address the needs of their listeners because they understand their nature, or as Ezekiel Ajibade puts it:

> If they are told not to engage in idolatry or any other form of diabolic compromise the gospel must meet their needs. This is one of the reasons for the rise of African Independent Churches and this is one of the reasons the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have not only drawn many away from mainline evangelical churches but have affected their structures and content of worship. Preaching must carry life and the Word must be confirmed as it is preached.[9]

In high-context churches, the sermons are often delivered in a lively way.[10] Most African preachers preach with passion and expect the congregation to respond spontaneously. Exclamations such as 'Amen', 'Hallelujah' or 'Preach it Pastor' are very common. The same is true for the rest of the

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5 T. S. Warren, 'Can Topical Preaching Also Be Expository?', in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. by H. Robinson and C. B. Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 419.

6 Ibid., p. 419.

7 Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, p. 87.

8 Ibid., p. 87.

9 E. A. Ajibade, 'A Historical Overview of Preaching in Africa in the 19th and 20th Century' (unpublished research paper, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, undated), 12-13 <https://www.academia.edu/34832354/a_historical_overview_of_preaching_in_africa_in_the_19_th_and_20_th_century> [accessed 13 October 2020].

10 Cf. A. Wright, 'Lessons Learned From My Minority Experience', in *What Happens When Students Are in the Minority: Experiences That Impact Human Performance*, ed. by C. B. Hutchison (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 182.

worship in such churches. There tends to be a lot of body movements among the worshippers and the songs which the congregation sing are often vigorous songs with simple repetitive messages.[11] In high-context churches worship means an energetic and enthusiastic celebration.

In many churches, we can find elements of both a high-context and a low-context orientation.[12] There is, however, a danger when one orientation becomes too dominant. Plueddemann notes: 'The danger of a service that is overly high-context is that it can lead to shallow emotionalism, self-centeredness, and false teaching, while the danger of overly idea-oriented worship is that it can lead to dead orthodoxy.'[13]

At this point, it must be noted that there are many African Christians who prefer to worship in the way they have inherited from the Western missionaries who first came to share the gospel with their foremothers and forefathers.[14] These Christians, who usually belong to mainline Mission Initiated Churches, love the old Western hymns, the traditional liturgies and the structured way of preaching. In contrast to Pentecostal and African Independent Churches (AIC) which seek to preserve elements of indigenous spirituality (such as loud congregational prayer, African-style music and dancing), experience shows that attempts to indigenise the worship or preaching style in such Mission Initiated Churches are often met with resistance from the congregation. Preachers in Africa and those who train them 'must be conscious of these two divides and must be able to reach each group'.[15] They must be flexible and able to preach both topical and expository sermons.

Like verse-by-verse expository preaching, topical preaching must be biblically based and expositional, and like most topical preaching in Africa, verse-by-verse expository preaching must engage with the African culture of the listeners. To be both, expositional and contextual, is undoubtedly the biggest challenge for both indigenous and Western preachers in Africa. Many Pentecostal or AIC preachers, for example, centre their message on the felt needs of their hearers at the expense of biblical truth.[16] They communicate their messages in a culturally relevant

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11 Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, p. 87.

12 Ibid., p. 86.

13 Ibid.

14 Cf. E. A. Ajibade, 'Communicating the Gospel to the African Church' (unpublished research paper, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 7 <https://www.academia.edu/34636431/Communicating_the_Gospel_to_the_African_Church> [accessed 13 October 2020].

15 Ibid.

16 E. A. Ajibade, 'Towards the Concept of an African Christian Preaching: Preliminary Considerations and Building Blocks' (unpublished research paper,

way, but they still fail their congregations because 'their hermeneutics are faulty and a good hermeneutic is the foundation for a good homiletic'.[17] Their topical sermons go biblically astray, as they make the biblical passages speak about a subject that is different from the one intended by the inspired biblical authors.[18] According to Marius Nel, many African Pentecostal preachers would, in principle, agree that a proper exegesis of the sermon passage with the help of commentaries, concordances, and Bible background books is necessary, but in practice, there is significant reluctance among them to carry out a thorough grammatical, historical and literary study of the biblical text.[19] Nel explains:

> They fear, however, that academic work in exegeting the text may minimize the influence of the Spirit because, they argue, the Bible is not automatically and mechanically the word of God but only becomes the word when the life-giving power of the Spirit assimilates, enlivens, and transmits it. (...) What the text meant in its original cultural context is less important for Pentecostals looking for the link with the contemporary situation and its application in daily life. This hermeneutic constantly reinforces the conviction that the spiritual and extraordinary supernatural experiences of biblical characters need to be re-enacted in the lives of contemporary believers.[20]

Others, who have been trained in the West or by Western missionaries in Africa, preach Bible-based expository sermons, but also fail their hearers because they communicate biblical truth in a way that tends to ignore the cultural background and social situation of their listeners. Like the British preacher, they forget that they do not deliver their message in a socio-cultural vacuum. While the former need to learn how to expound the Scripture accurately, the latter need to learn how to communicate unchanging biblical truth in the 'language' of their African audience, i.e. they need to learn how to contextualise the message. What is needed is both the application of hermeneutical principles and the use of cul-

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Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 9 <https://www.academia.edu/34576981/towards_the_concept_of_an_african_christian_preaching_preliminary_considerations_and_building_blocks> [accessed 13 October 2020].

17 Ibid.

18 Cf. D. Sumukjian, 'The Biblical Topical Sermon', in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. by H. Robinson and C. B. Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 421.

19 M. Nel, 'Re-enactment Leading to Transformation: A Critical Assessment of the Distinctives of Pentecostal Preaching', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3/1 (2017), p. 294.

20 Ibid., pp. 294-5.

tural, historical and social insights. Everyone who preaches in Africa (or in African churches in the West) needs to be familiar with the African worldview, which is often still influenced by pre-Christian thinking.[21] For instance, a preacher must understand the reason why so many of his hearers ask him to pray for them after the Sunday service: Some of them may believe that they cannot approach God directly while others may be convinced that the prayer of the 'man of God' is more powerful than their own. Ajibade gives a helpful definition of Christian preaching in Africa, which takes these points into account. 'African Christian Preaching', he writes, 'should be preaching that is principally biblical, based on the text of God's word, and interpreted and explained in the language and idioms of the Africans, considering their cultural milieu and aiming at bringing the (…) transformation that Africa needs.'[22]

## THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

When we look at the apostle Paul's preaching ministry it becomes obvious that it was characterised by a great deal of flexibility and sensitivity.[23] Paul's preaching style differed much depending on his audience. The evangelistic sermons he preached to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogues were different from the ones he preached to Gentiles who did not have any connection with the Jewish faith and the Hebrew Bible. Paul was very much aware of the differences in worldviews and culture between those who were biblically literate and those who were not.

The apostle knew that he had to adjust himself and his preaching, without compromising the Gospel message, to his hearers and their socio-cultural background. He had to translate the content of the good news into words meaningful to his audiences in their particular contexts. In Paul's own words: 'To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law [….] I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings' (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

In Pisidian Antioch, for example, Paul speaks to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the local synagogue (Acts 13:16). By addressing his Jewish

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21 B. A. Ogunlana, 'Preaching Christ in African Context', *BTSK Insight* October (2017), p. 92.

22 Ajibade, 'Towards the Concept of an African Christian Preaching', p. 5.

23 Cf. R. L. Reymond, *Paul Missionary Theologian: A Survey of his Missionary Labours and Theology* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), p. 563; J. W. Thompson, *Peaching like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 36.

audience as 'fellow Israelites', he may appeal to their national pride, as David Williams suggests.[24] However, there is another purpose for choosing these words. The apostle stresses that he is one of them. Paul wants to leave his Jewish listeners in no doubt that he is a true Jew, or as he puts it in his letter to the Philippians, that he is 'of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews' (3:5). The people Paul is speaking to are familiar with the Jewish Scriptures and the history of Israel. Mindful of this, Paul chooses a message which 'is tailored to suit an audience with a background of knowledge about the Old Testament'.[25] Thus, he begins his sermon by recapitulating Israel's history from the patriarchs to the monarchy. Having mentioned the reign of King David he immediately turns to 'the Saviour Jesus' (Acts 13:23). The historical survey Paul gives serves only one purpose: '[T]o root the coming of Jesus in the kingly succession of Judah and to show that the career of Jesus was in fulfilment of prophecy.'[26] Paul's sermon is both 'a classic rabbinical sermon' and 'a classic apostolic proclamation of the gospel'.[27]

Speaking to the biblically illiterate intellectuals of Athens gathered in the Areopagus, Paul decides to choose a different approach.[28] Paul's audience is committed to various Greek philosophies and in Acts 17:18 Luke mentions two of them: Stoicism and Epicureanism. In other words, their worldview is totally different from that of the Jews and God-fearers in Pisidian Antioch. Therefore, Paul decides not to quote biblical texts but Greek poets and philosophers to strengthen his argument.[29] I. Howard Marshall points out that the quotes Paul uses in verses 28 'come from Aratus, but they are also found in a slightly different form in Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*'.[30] After referring to the religious interest of the Athenians as a touchpoint to attract their attention,[31] Paul begins his sermon by constructing a biblical worldview.[32]

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24 D. J. Williams, *Acts* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 232.

25 A. Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 386.

26 I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), pp. 220-1.

27 H. O. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 1: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 174.

28 D. A. Carson, 'Athens Revisited', in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 388.

29 M. J. Newell, *Crossing Cultures in Scripture: Biblical Principles for Mission Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), p. 238.

30 Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 289.

31 Newell, *Crossing Cultures in Scripture*, p. 237.

32 Carson, 'Athens Revisited', p. 394.

To start with Moses, the history of Israel or the promise of a Messiah would not be helpful. Paul has first to establish a framework, in which the person of Jesus, his death on a Roman cross and his resurrection from the dead make sense.[33] Before he introduces the risen Jesus to them, Paul explains that God is the creator God and ruler over everything who 'does not live in temples built by human hands' (Acts 17:24). He continues to stress God's self-existence, human dependence on him, the descent of all nations from one man, the diversity of ethnicities and human habitation, God's immanence, the need for humans to seek God and to repent of their sin (Acts 17:25-31). Keith Davy comments: 'Paul's message in Acts 17:22-31 was a philosophically driven presentation, appropriate to the Greek philosophers gathered in the Areopagus. Here Paul presented biblical truth without biblical references.'[34]

The apostle Paul clearly had the ability to contextualise not only himself as the message bearer but also the gospel message itself. We can see this in the sermons he preached and which are recorded in the Book of Acts, as we can also see in his letters within which he uses different images that illustrate the good news of salvation in Christ.

Depending on the people he addresses, Paul borrows language from the market place, the law court, the temple, the family, the military or politics,[35] or as Dean Flemming puts it: 'Paul does not feel compelled to recycle the same images and themes to explain the Gospel of Christ in every letter. Rather, he draws on whatever language is needed for the gospel to be incarnated in the life worlds of his mission communities.'[36] Writing to the Roman Christians, who live in a depraved Gentile society that despises them,[37] the apostle uses the language of the courtroom to illustrate the gospel message, 'For we maintain that a person is justified

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33 Ibid., p. 394.

34 K. A. Davy, 'The Gospel for a New Generation', in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 358.

35 In 1 Corinthians 6:20, for example, Paul uses the language of the market place when he reminds the Corinthians that they 'were bought at a price', while in Ephesians 1:5 he uses the language of the family by writing that God 'predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ'. The language of the military can be found in texts like Colossians 2:15, 'And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them triumphing over them by the cross.'

36 D. Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective of Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), p. 169.

37 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1971), pp. 16-17.

by faith apart from the works of the law' (Rom. 3:28). In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, a Roman colony, Paul applies another language, i.e. the language of politics. In chapter 3, verse 20 he assures them, 'But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.' Paul's choice of language is deliberate. In a city whose population has the same privileges as the citizens of Rome,[38] the image of citizenship is one the Christians can easily relate to. The same is true for the believers in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 2:14 the apostle writes, 'But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.' Paul is using the military image of the Roman triumph, one of the most impressive scenes in Roman public life.[39] The Roman triumph was a victory parade celebrated by Roman generals on their return to Rome after a successful military campaign. The successful general rode in a chariot accompanied by his soldiers and the captives they had taken from many nations. In Paul's picture the Roman general, who has defeated the enemies of Rome, has become the Christ who defeated the enemies of humankind, i.e. sin, death, and the devil.[40] Flemming's comment on the apostle's approach is particularly helpful. He writes:

> With striking flexibility and creativity, Paul relates the good news and its implications to people's situations. Long before missiologists started using the term Paul engaged in the "contextualization" of the gospel. We would do well to follow Paul's lead. Although the sacred story at the heart of the good news does not change, we are called to flexibly engage our ever-changing world. This requires listening to people's stories and concerns, as well as discerning how the good news might speak to their particular life circumstances.[41]

Depending on the context and situation African and Western preachers find themselves in, some languages of salvation might be culturally more relevant and effective than others. The picture of *adoption into God's family*, which Paul uses in passages such as Romans 8:23 or Ephesians 1:5, can be, as Victor Kuligin points out, particularly helpful to those who

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38 T. C. Smith, 'Philippi', in *Lutterworth Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by W. E. Mills (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1994), p. 684.

39 P. Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), p. 52.

40 Cf. L. J. Ogilvie, *The Communicator's Commentary: 1, 2 Corinthians* (Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1986), p. 218.

41 Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, p. 170.

have experienced isolation and estrangement in their lives.[42] Kuligin continues:

> In Namibia, this model of salvation is quite powerful. Some studies put the birthrate of children born out of wedlock somewhere around 90 percent, a shocking statistic. Marriage is a relative rarity, and it is an anomaly to find people who were raised their entire childhood by two parents. (...) There are few Namibians who can speak of the warmth and security that come from an intact, nuclear family. Those who can have a great blessing that many of their fellow compatriots will never know. It is in this atmosphere of the disintegration of the family that the adoption model of salvation can be quite moving.[43]

## CONCLUSION

While it can be very helpful to introduce African preachers from high-context churches to the concept of sermon series and verse-by-verse expository preaching, they should also be familiarised with topical sermons which are grounded in Scripture and which avoid common mistakes like eisegesis, proof-texting or spiritualising. At the same time, Western missionaries and preachers from low-context churches need to be encouraged to preach both classic and topical expository sermons that make use of African proverbs, folktales or examples from daily life in rural and urban Africa. If the apostle Paul could quote Greek poetry in Athens, there is no reason why a preacher who preaches on James 1:22-25 in an African church cannot use an African saying like 'The roaring lion doesn't kill the game' to drive home the message that Christians need to be doers of God's Word. '[T]he proclamation of the gospel will be more effective if the African cultural experiences and identity are accommodated.'[44] In other words, the gospel of salvation needs to be contextualised. 'Instead of pretending that one size fits it all', Kuligin notes, 'we need to approach individuals in their specific context and share the gospel in the light of their particular struggle'.[45]

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42 V. Kuligin, *The Language of Salvation: Discovering the Riches of What It Means to Be Saved* (Wooster: Weaver Book Company, 2015), p. 58.

43 Ibid.

44 Ajibade, 'Towards the Concept of an African Christian Preaching', p. 7.

45 Kuligin, *The Language of Salvation*, p. 21.