

Seeker Sensitive Preaching

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The fastest growing demographic in North America is the spiritually yearning, institutionally alienated public. They are the targets of the new “Christian mission to the gentiles” in the emerging pagan world. These are people of all ages (including increasing numbers of seniors) who have a deep spiritual hunger, but are alienated from, indifferent toward, or even hostile to any form of organized religion. Profoundly interested in spirituality, they are profoundly disinterested in the institutional church of any brand name be it mainstream or evangelical.

Ironically, many congregations of established churches include more “gentiles” than true “disciples”. The earliest church of the Acts of the Apostles would have called the worshippers who assemble on Sunday morning “God-Fearers”. They are there out of a sense of loyalty to a tradition, but unclear about what they really believe. Or, they are there to accompany family members or meet friends, but resist any personal invitation to mission. Or, they are there because anxiety about health, life cycles, and aging has made them fearful about what God may or may not allow to happen in the future. Or, they are there to support an ideological or dogmatic agenda, but desire as little interaction with the mysterious Holy as possible.

The seekers are there. They have brokenness they cannot heal, questions they cannot answer, emptiness they cannot fill ... and they are convinced that institutional religion is the last place to do it. They passionately desire to leap further, go deeper, climb higher, or be stiller ... and they are convinced that the last people on earth who really would want to do that with them are church people. Many are among the micro-cultures of the community, and attending your church worship is an embarrassment at best and an occasional painful necessity. Many are among your church membership, and attending worship is an obligation at best and a necessary routine en route to coffee.

Yet most preaching doggedly ignores this reality.

- ❑ On the one hand, preachers still pretend that those multitudes of seekers *aren't really there*, and still assume that the worshippers are all true disciples who observe the Christian Year, read their Bibles, share Jesus, and pray for strangers on a daily basis. Preachers assume they should exposit a Common Lectionary that is largely indifferent to demographic context and cultural nuance, educate people with three or more abstract points, and connect the experience of the Holy with the pastoral care and counseling of the members.
- ❑ On the other hand, preachers still pretend that the multitudes of seekers *aren't really seeking*, and that the micro-cultures are godless, stupid, gullible consumers. Preachers assume they should lambaste them with criticism and snort at their selfishness, while convincing them to assent to theological formulas and submit to their moral codes. They ramble through anecdotes, salted with favored snippets of Scripture, and connect the experience of the Holy with rational assent and financial support for the institutional strategic plan.

This dogged indifference of preachers to the “gentiles” of the emerging pagan world has made “preaching” a dirty word to most people in America. The very activity lowers the credibility of clergy today, because most people assume “preachers” do not really care about who they really are, and are not interested in having a serious conversation among equals.

I don't want to be unfair. In the midst of all that dogged indifference, there is some excellent preaching going on in the established church. But that is just the problem ... it is going inside the established church instead of outside in the mission field. No doubt James, the brother of Jesus, did some terrific preaching in the head office in Jerusalem. In ancient times, that was balanced by a different kind of preaching in the “mission to the Gentiles”. These are two very different kinds of preaching.

- The best preaching in the Jerusalem head office (and in the sanctuaries of established churches across North America) involves conformity, predictability, and linear communication. Conform to the pattern of the ecumenical Christian Year, present every week in a predictable style, and communicate truth one paragraph at a time.
- The best preaching at the river in Philippi, on the acropolis in Athens, or in the center at the strip mall involves contextuality, unpredictability, and lateral communication. Connect with the peculiar context of the community, present each time with maximum originality, and communicate truth one environment at a time.

In Jerusalem, preachers call for quiet, avoid anything that might distract concentrated thought, and engage the mind. In Philippi, preachers choreograph noise, embrace everything that might communicate meaning, and engage the heart.

What, then, is truly seeker sensitive preaching? We learn by observing the practice of those ancient preachers who first set out in “mission to the gentiles.”

First, seeker sensitive preaching is targeted to a micro-culture. It is not designed to integrate with three-year cycle of education, and it is not designed to expound pet passages and projects. From first to last, seeker sensitive preaching focuses on the Macedonian or Athenian or Roman: their context, their culture, their questions, their issues, and their problems. Preachers *never* write sermons in the study. They *only* write sermons in the food court or the sports arena. They ask: *What is the crux of the human dilemma for these people, and how can the power of God be brought to bear on that dilemma to so that its solution cascades grace into all the rest of their living?*

This targeting shapes the preparation strategy, content, and style of the preached message. The preacher prepares by eavesdropping, observing, and dialoging with the target culture. The message is shaped by whatever medium, symbol, or activity opportunistically lies at hand. The style adapts the language, mannerisms, fashion, and nuance of the gentiles who happen to be in the crowd at any given time. This makes the sermon seem more “off hand” than “carefully prepared”, and the preachers credibility hinges more on “sincerity” than “expertise”.

Second, seeker sensitive preaching is seriously respectful. I say “seriously”, because however flippant or humorous the presentation might be, the preacher is very intentional about honoring the intelligence and sincerity of the hearers. Paul’s compliment to the Athenians about being very religious people contains no irony or hidden condescension. He means it. He respects their spirituality so much that he bares all by being equally honest about his own. Respect means that he is prepared to *learn* from them, as well as *share* with them.

This respect is only possible because of the profound humility of the preacher in the mission to the gentiles. Even the best preaching at the head office in Jerusalem is tinged with a measure of condescension ... the preacher is generally acknowledged to be better educated, more disciplined, and unusually called for the task. Everyone knows the preacher is on collegial terms with God. But in the mission to the gentiles, no such condescension is allowed. The preacher is no better off than the hearers, and is mere flotsam amid the uncontrollable tides of mysterious Spirit. Given the perpetual insecurity of that kind of preaching, you had better listen carefully and learn from everybody.

Third, seeker sensitive preaching is motivational. It is really not intended to fill the mind with correct information and pure doctrine. It is intended to change life, open eyes, liberate slaves, excite spiritual growth, and push people into mission. The education comes later. Preaching is all about confronting the obstacles blocking abundant life, and rebuking the demons holding people back. When Paul heals the possessed woman (Acts 16) ... that’s preaching. When Phillip convinces the Ethiopian VIP to stop the chariot so he can be baptized in a mud puddle (Acts 8) ... that’s preaching. When Peter removes the barriers of prejudice allowing the Spirit to be poured out on Cornelius and his Roman soldiers ... that’s preaching.

Fourth, seeker sensitive preaching is always supported by immediate mentoring. In Jerusalem, the preacher can afford to send people home to lunch, confident that they will return to the Bible Study class later in the week. In Ephesus, the preacher deploys handpicked mentors like Priscilla and Aquila into the listening crowd even before they go to refreshments. People won't come back to the parlor later in the week. Trusted disciples need to make eye contact, initiate intimate conversation, and personally place motivated people on the path of spiritual growth. What "nails" the message in the hearts of the hearers is not Paul's powerful finish, or Peter's last rhetorical flourish, or Phillip's final eye contact. It is the personal presence, lifestyle model, and urgent availability of the deployed mentors that does it.

Fifth, seeker sensitive preaching is immediately followed by continuous prayer. Most students of scripture miss the real point behind all those epistles preserved in the New Testament. Those letters were not primarily written to instruct newly converted gentiles, but to assure them that the missionaries were *praying* for them constantly. In Jerusalem, the newly educated worshippers don't risk much on their way home, and all they really need are a few more skills and insights to fulfill the institutional strategic plan. But in Corinth, the newly converted and motivated Christians risk their lives and livelihoods on their way home, and what they *really* need is confidence that Christ is going to be with them amid the suspicion, rejection, or persecution that will inevitably come.

Finally, seeker sensitive preaching explicitly connects believers with Jesus. Preachers do not preach about theology, or polity, or policy, or programs. They preach Christ ... mysterious incarnation ... crucified and risen ... ever present ... the one and only real hope. This is not to say that theology and other matters of faith and practice are not important. It's just that they are important *in Jerusalem*. Out here in the mission field of the emerging pagan world, first the preacher must establish the significance of Christ.

When I was in seminary, homiletics teachers taught me to preach in Jerusalem. I was supposed to spend an hour in the study for every minute in the pulpit, exposit the lectionary, follow the Christian seasons, develop three points, illustrate them primarily with stories about dead saints, and hand-off the worshippers to committee chairpersons during the week. Once I had the vision of the Macedonian, and took ship to brave pirates and stormy weather to cross the street to Walmart, I had to learn how to preach differently. Here is the new preaching routine:

1) Targeting Prayer:

Deploy the worship design team to listen, deploy yourself into culture, open yourself to the guidance of the spirit of Christ, and discern the micro-culture for whom your heart bursts. This is a team preparation, not just an individual preparation. It's what Paul did with Silas and Luke and Priscilla before ever standing in front of the Athenians on the Acropolis.

2) Focus "The Question":

Clarify the crux of the human condition that currently obsesses that micro-culture for whom your heart bursts. Identify the question that lies deepest in their hearts, and boldly articulate it in their own language, music, and visual art. Capture their attention because you understand them so well. Help them see their situation more poignantly than they have even dared themselves.

3) Share the "The Big Idea":

Elaborate the one insight, or reveal the one image, or describe the one thing that answers that question, addresses that condition, or overcomes that obstacle. It is a big idea because it is foundational, all encompassing, and cascades implications that touch all aspects of the lifestyle of the target micro-culture for whom your heart bursts.

4) Make "The Jesus Connection":

Link their question to your big idea, through the experience of Jesus Christ. You can emphasize the human or emphasize the divine, but never ignore the paradox, and always use the paradox to

point toward abundant life. Jesus is the key to the lock, or the detonator to the dynamite, or the door to future.

5) Complete “The Mentoring Hand-Off”:

Immediately recognize the handful of mentors deployed in the crowd before you bring the sermon to an end. Set up the conversation over refreshments. Send people to cell groups. Follow them with email, personal visits, and small group opportunities to interact with spiritual giants who can guide them further down the road to mission with Jesus.

6) Tell them of your prayers:

Never take Monday off. Be visible and available among the micro-culture the day after you preach the Gospel in their midst. Allow them the chance to bite your head off, ask you questions, or seek your counsel. Most of all, simply invite them to pray with you and to hear your prayers for them. After all, they will not pursue a Christian lifestyle if they are not convinced that the spirit of Christ will care for them on the turbulent road that lies ahead.

The problem with preaching in North America today is that most preachers are not prepared to look like complete idiots. They are too afraid that pagans might laugh at them, mock them, or throw them in prison. They are even more afraid that their denominational superiors or congregational personnel committees might criticize them, reappoint them, or cut them off from their pension plan. When Paul wrote about being a “fool for Christ”, he was not exaggerating.

In the emerging world of multi-track worship and multiple-site churches, is it even possible that one preacher can be effective both in Jerusalem and in Philippi? Yes, but it will be hard. Paul did it. Peter did it. James, the brother of Jesus, could not. Evidently, neither could a number of the other disciples. The difference, I think, lies in the radical humility of the preacher. Peter humiliated himself before God on the rooftop in Joppa. Paul surrendered everything he valued to risk shipwreck for Jesus. The difficulty for any one individual to achieve such radical humility may motivate church leaders of the future to surrender “senior pastor” prestige, and partner in true teams. Imagine the staff with equally valued, but very different preachers, one for Jerusalem and one for Ephesus, guiding the church to become all things, to all people, that by all means, *together* they might rescue some!

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