

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**TEACHING HOMILETICS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL
CONTEXT:
A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa¹ as a country underwent major political and social changes during the early and mid 1990's.² The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church did not escape this transformation, with the merging of the Southern Union Mission Conference (SU) and the South African Union Conference (SAU) taking place at the end of 1991 to form the Southern Africa Union Conference.

The former SU was comprised of Conferences/Fields whose membership almost exclusively consisted of those classified racially as "Black." The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed explication of the race classification categories as previously used in South Africa. For the sake of this paper, the following is used, with no intention of any of the terms being pejorative, but rather descriptive for the purpose of illustrating the practical situation facing the church in SA. "Black" refers to the descendents of the original indigenous population of South Africa; "Colored" to those classified as being of mixed descent; Asiatic and Indian – those whose forebears settled in SA from the Indian sub-continent and other Asian countries and; "Whites" – those classified as having European ancestry. The former SAU was comprised of those classified as White, Colored (mixed) and Indian and Asiatic.

¹ A distinction is made in this paper between South Africa and Southern Africa. South Africa refers to the country, the Republic of South Africa. Southern Africa refers to the territory that is encompassed by the Southern Africa Union Conference. This includes the countries of South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho.

² The ANC was unbanned and Nelson Mandela released in 1990. The first democratic elections were conducted in South Africa in April of 1994.

The merging of the two Unions was followed by the merging of the Natal Field¹ and the Oranje Natal Conference² in 1994, forming the KwaZulu-Natal Freestate Conference, and with the merger of the Southern³ and Good Hope Conferences⁴ taking place over the weekend of September 12/13, 1997. The latter conference thus formed became the Southern Hope Conference (SHC).⁵

Many implications affecting the growth, development and administration of the Church in South Africa arose from these events. One of them was the advent of systematized multi-cultural pastorates and ministry.⁶ Pastors found themselves appointed to districts where they were serving people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.⁷ To many of these pastors, the exposure to the different cultures and ethnic groupings was a totally new and foreign experience. A challenge that faced and still faces pastors operating within this new context is that of preaching.

PROBLEM

The Protestant heritage of the SDA church recognizes the centrality of preaching in corporate worship. Through preaching, the minister presents propositional truth to the congregation. However, if the hearers do not understand the speaker, be it for whatever reason, then he or she who preaches does so in vain.

¹ A "Black" field in the eastern part of the country

² The corresponding White, Coloured, Asiatic, Indian conference covering the same territory as the Natal field, including the Free State Province

³ Black members in the former Cape Province

⁴ Coloured Asiatic and Indian members in the same territory

⁵ The developments within this merged conference will be used as the point of reference for this paper as the author was appointed as its first president where he served up till June 30 2000 before being called to his present position at Helderberg College and thus has a reasonable working knowledge of the issues raised within this particular context.

⁶ The pastoral district delineations in the Southern Hope Conference from the outset were made with geographical considerations as the prime criteria.

⁷ The South African society is composed of various ethnic & cultural groups. The major groupings are traditionally classified as White (of European decent), African (of indigenous decent), Colored (of mixed decent) and Indian.

Some of the reasons for the inability to understand the preacher are communication barriers. Skinner describes some of these as being:

1. differences in mental images
2. differences in verbal symbols
3. differences through unclear objectives
4. differences through irrelevant presentation.¹

One of the factors that can lead to these and other “differences” is cultural differences in the homiletical approach. A survey of homiletics textbooks reveals two significant factors:

- a) Most textbooks are Euro-American based, and consequently;
- b) The textbooks and methodology used in the teaching of homiletics promote a format and style of preaching based on a Western oriented ideology, philosophy and worldview.²

While recognizing the effects of globalisation and the increasing Westernisation of many cultures, there are many areas that have not assimilated Western culture and exhibit different forms and modes of transmission of information and, more importantly, propositional truth. However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which originated in a Euro-American milieu during the mid-19th century, appears to lean heavily upon that tradition when teaching homiletics.

¹ Skinner, pp 94-101

² While this essay reflects a South African context, I believe the issue and subsequent recommendations will find resonance in other non-European/American countries.

The result is that men and women are sent out to preach to a constituency such as the SHC community¹ that is 73% Black with the greater percentage of those having a non-English mother tongue, viz. Xhosa with a Western oriented training. When one recognizes that 75% of the Xhosa speakers attend church in areas that are predominantly rural and thus only marginally influenced by globalisation and Western thinking, then the barriers as listed by Skinner come into sharp focus.

What needs to be pointed out is that the barriers are not necessarily formed because the preachers are of a different culture or race or language group to the Xhosa speaking members. Even if the preachers *are* Black Xhosa speakers, there is still a “cultural” divide when it comes to the preaching process. This is due to the fact that those of the Black preachers who have been college-trained have been exposed to the Euro-American homiletic influence and stand equally indicted as sometimes being culturally insensitive to the needs of the members, albeit unintentionally². They are victims of their training. And, in the words of Shakespeare, “Therein lies the rub.”³

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how differences in culture necessitate a variety of modes of transmitting religious truth. The implications of this require a revisioning of the methods employed in teaching Homiletics in the Theology

¹ The conference membership stands at 27 100 as of 18 November 2000.

² Dr Garland Dulan, Associate Director of Education of the General Conference recalls instances of Pakistani ministers, having completed their theology training, who found it difficult to return to the rural villages to preach to the country inhabitants in Urdu. Apart from the fact that their orientation was to preach in English, the Western context of their training made it difficult for them to be able to relate the gospel in modalities that would be easily assimilated by the rural communities.

³ *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare.

³ Helderberg College is the only senior college and the only college offering ministerial training in Southern Africa.

Department of the SDA College in Southern Africa, Helderberg College.¹ An attempt will be made to demonstrate the integration of faith and learning through showing how Homiletics, as a science, can be adapted to facilitate the transmission of truth through media that can optimally be assimilated within different cultures.

An attempt will be made to suggest strategies for the teaching of Homiletics in and for a multicultural setting.

DEFINITIONS

In order to facilitate an examination of the focus of this essay, certain words or concepts need clarification:

1. Homiletics

The dictionary definition of the word *Homiletics* is fairly consistent in defining it as “the art of preaching and delivering sermons.”² Hence when referring to the teaching of Homiletics, instruction in the art of preparing and delivering sermons is being addressed. As further indicated by *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed.*, it is “the branch of practical theology that treats of [sic] homilies or sermons.”

2. Culture

The Random House Dictionary provides a succinct anthropological definition of culture: “. . . the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transferred from one generation to another.” This is echoed by Kraft who states that

² Webster’s New World Dictionary. Similarly, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the Random House dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed.

[o]ur culture is that in terms of which our life is organized. It may be looked at as the rules guiding our lives – rules developed from millions of agreements between the members of our society.¹

Richard Niebuhr, in his seminal volume, *Christ and Culture*, defines culture thus:

It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes, and values. This “social heritage” . . . is what we mean when we speak of culture.²

HOMILETIC FORM

A survey of the course outlines and the accompanying textbooks prescribed for the teaching of homiletics at Helderberg College compared with the materials used at the campus of Mission College, Muak Lek, Thailand³ indicate remarkable similarities. When juxtaposed with the writer’s own homiletics training -- Good Hope College (1971-1974) and Andrews University (1992-1994) -- then the similarities become even more noteworthy.

What emerges is the basic concept of the systematic construction of a sermon.

Utilising engineering and architectural imagery, the student is guided into developing or building his sermon in a logical, analytical and methodical manner. The student is taught to think of a sermon as consisting of an Introduction, Body and Conclusion.

He is sometimes admonished to “Tell the congregation what you are going to tell

¹ Kraft, 47

² Niebuhr, 32

³ The venue for the 27th Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar at which this paper was first presented.

them, tell them, then tell them that you have told them.” I would like to propose this as a presupposition as to what many believe sermon construction to be.

Most basic texts will guide the student in how to develop Textual, Topical or Biographical¹ sermons. Some will add Expository² to the list, while others will concentrate on only Expository.³ Vitrano, while emphasizing the Topical and Textual format of sermon construction, suggests others such as:

1. Monroe’s Motivational sequence
2. The Perry Method
3. The Inductive Method⁴

Vitrano does suggest alternative types and structures. However, the presupposition is maintained with regard to what is a sermon and what is sermon construction. Notice what he says after discussing the Topical type sermon:

Up to this point we have considered the building or designing of what is known as a topical sermon: (1) . . . you have chosen a biblical theme or topic; (2) you have gathered the material into parts or divisions; (3) you have arranged the parts in a certain order or progression; (4) you have checked for unity to be sure that all the parts are an elaboration of the theme or topic. *Keep this in mind. They are basic to all preaching* (emphasis supplied).⁵

HOMILETIC OUTCOMES

Generally, the student is carefully guided through the process of learning the art of sermon construction. This is done without reference to the recipients or beneficiaries of the end product. He is diligently taught the “how” without as much consideration

¹ Gibbs

² Skinner

³ Miller

⁴ Vitrano, 43-47

⁵ Ibid, 31

given to the “whom.” Her instructors will consider the task of homiletics complete if at the end of the training period she is able to produce a well-articulated, well-constructed, well-arranged three-part sermon that conforms to methods contained in the prescribed texts. However, is this a satisfactory outcome?

Should the outcome not be focused on whether the hearers will have their faith strengthened, their beliefs consolidated, their hope assured and their assurance of salvation reaffirmed? And this can only happen when the congregation can truly *hear* the message. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Romans 10:17.

The generally prescribed texts have stood the test of time and within a Euro-American context have much to offer. However, within an African context, the question needs to be asked as to whether we are presenting this homiletic form to our students without consideration being given to the prospective hearers.

The example of Christ illustrates how He encountered a form of preaching that was not reaching the hearts and minds of the general target group. The preachers of their day were communicating in ways that prevented the target audience from “hearing” religious truth. Of Christ and His preaching it was said: “No man ever spoke like this Man!” And what was His method? “And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them.” Mark4:33,34. And why did He use parables? Because it was a method that was able to speak to the minds and the hearts of His hearers within the culture in which they operated. “Jesus sought an avenue to every heart. By using a variety of

illustrations, He not only presented truth in its different phases, but appealed to the different hearers.”¹

Paul adapted his preaching style—his homiletic form—depending on whether he was preaching to Jews, Greeks, Romans or a mixture of cultures. It was he who said, “. . . I have become all things to all men . . .” 1 Corinthians 9:22. As with Christ, the outcome was of paramount importance: “. . . that I might by all means save some.” 1 Corinthians 9:22.

HOMILETIC FORM AND CULTURE

It can be argued that it is natural for the examples of homiletic texts cited earlier to present preparation for preaching in the way they do. As indicated, the bases of these volumes are Euro-American thinking. It appeals to and caters for a Western form of culture. This culture could be described as:

- Individualistic
- Analytical/logic driven
- Empirically oriented
- Time-focused
- Product delivery oriented

Each one of these descriptors has an impact upon the way a sermon is conceptualised and presented. For example, the analytical, logic-driven society expects a sermon to be drafted in a way that will exhibit attributes of systematic structure, logical progression and rational presentation. Furthermore, a *time-focused* community would

¹ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 21

expect that a sermon would ideally last around 20 minutes, because communication researches, studying data gleaned from largely Western subjects have determined that the maximum period during which an audience, class or congregation can devote optimal attention to a presentation is 20 minutes. It is the Western mind that is *product-delivery* oriented that seeks to get value for money and expects the preacher to come up with the goods, and thus the logical, analytical, clinical, 20-minute sermon must provide a product that can be positively received and evaluated. It is the *individualistic* society that sees religion as a personal matter to the point that sermons do not address the concerns or needs of a community, but must seek to meet the needs of the individual within the congregation, producing the “What-did-I-get-out-of-the-sermon-this-morning” syndrome. It is the *empirically oriented* individual that settles back into the pew and says, “Right, I’m here. Give me a good reason for having come to church today.”

The teaching of homiletics from a Western perspective would of necessity have to factor these issues into the process of training candidates for the ministry. However, a problem arises when these methods are non-critically transferred into non-Western or multi-cultural societies and an attempt is made to apply them to non-Western cultures. The issue is exacerbated when these methods are employed to the exclusion of any other alternatives.

When comparing the African cultural perspective to that of the Western, we begin to see why alternative styles of preaching are needed. In contrast to the earlier description of Western culture, African culture can be described as:

- Community oriented¹
- Event driven
- Relationally oriented
- Religion is life²
- The cycles of life are for celebrating

In contrast to the Western expectations of worship, preaching and sermon construction, African believers do not see worship as just one of the elements of their weekly activities. They find that “[a] religion that is practical only for 2-3 hours a week is inadequate for the African whose worldview is holistic and whose religion permeates every aspect of life.”³ To the African who is *event driven* a sermon of 20 minutes leaves him wandering if there is something wrong with the preacher. After all, he or she has the whole day. They have come to Church. They will only be going back home this evening. Quoting from John S Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mathema points out that “Africans are notoriously religious.”⁴ Believing that *the cycles of life are for celebrating*, preaching in and of itself is not just an isolated event in their worship experience, but part of the process of celebrating the transcendence of God. One could be forgiven for thinking that Eugene Lowry was addressing this issue when he says: “. . . a sermon is an event-in-time . . . a process and not a collection of parts.”⁵ Preaching becomes part of recounting the marvellous deeds of God. It serves as the vehicle for transmitting the heritage of adoption, the heritage of belonging to the family of God. Through preaching, the *community* is drawn closer together through their common belief in the Supreme God. The community gathers together to find refreshing after a week of toil and hardship. They

¹ Mathema, 190

² Ibid, 182

³ Ibid, 185

⁴ Ibid, 182

⁵ Lowry, 25

come together to find solace, comfort and fellowship. The African mind would agree that “. . . a sermon is not a logical assemblage; a sermon is an event-in-time which follows the logic born of the communication interaction between preacher and congregation.”¹ The Sabbath sermon is not an interruption in the flow of a week of commercial activity, but a climax of their *religious* activity, which is their *life*. She will leave the house of worship, saying “We worshiped *our* God today.”

HOMILETICS, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

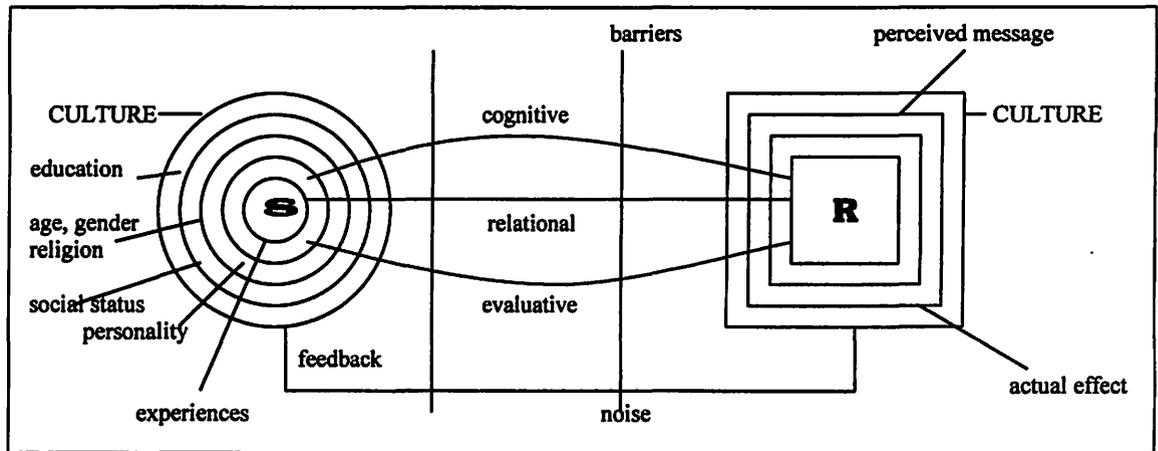
An approach to the instruction in the science of preaching could be two-pronged. The student needs to be tutored in the methodology of exegesis and hermeneutics. She needs the linguistic tools to be able to engage in a thorough examination and accurate interpretation of the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She should be guided into uncovering the historical and cultural setting of the Scriptures in order to gain a sound grasp of the intent of the writers of Scripture. These steps can be considered the assembling of the building blocks and mortar from which the sermon is to be constructed.

Secondly, the student should be taught to recognize that differences in culture impacts upon the communication process in preaching. Gottfried Oosterwal, in addressing communication across cultural boundaries, defines communication as “the sharing of messages with the least possible distortions.”² He points out that in the communication process, cultural differences and the disregard of those differences can pose an almost insurmountable barrier. As illustrated in the table below, he demonstrates how those elements that together constitute who we are – our culture –

¹ Ibid, 12

² Pollard, 22

can result in “misunderstandings and distortions and misinterpretations”¹ between the sender (S) and the receiver (R).



Oosterwal illustrates how culture even determines on what level communication is conducted, viz. cognitive, relational and evaluative. Within the African context, this can be illustrated by the simple process of greeting. Within the Western context, when two people exchange greetings, the perfunctory question, “How are you?” does not demand or expect an answer beyond that of “Fine, thank you.” The Western, cognitive mind is intent on getting past the formalities and, if business or other matters are to be discussed, get down to what matters.

Within the African context, the question “How are you?” means just that. The enquirer *wants* to know how you are; and not only you, but your family and extended family as well. The establishing and maintaining of a relationship is more important than the conveying of information or the conducting of business.

¹ Opcit.

Oosterwal suggests the following basic principles of cross-cultural communication:¹

1. Words do not have meaning by themselves; words derive their meaning from people's underlying cultural assumptions, values, and perceptions.
2. Consider not only the content of the message, but also its context.
3. Every culture has its own mode of communication.
4. Always keep in mind the true purpose of communication.
5. There is no communication without identification.

These considerations need to be proactively factored into the homiletic equation.

Once the student has learnt the principles of effective communication and the impact that culture has upon that process, he can take the building blocks and mortar and construct a sermon that will not only be clinically structured, but attractively decorated in a way that will send out a welcome message to any intended guests.

The course outline for Homiletics 1 (out of a curriculum that comprises Homiletics 1-4) as contained in appendix A attempts to illustrate how the teaching of the subject could incorporate this approach and the strategies outlined below.

TOWARD A STRATEGY OF TEACHING HOMILETICS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SETTING

The traditional methods employed by homiletics teachers do not make provision for the type of worship experience typically sought by the African believer.² A paradigm shift is needed on the part of theology departments in general and homiletics teachers in particular. We need to move away from considering theology as an extension of

¹ Ibid. 24-31

² Ibid, 192

Western culture. In this regard, Niebuhr comments: “Some theologians, like some anthropologists, do, indeed, think of Christian faith as integrally related to Western culture.”¹ We need to continue to teach homiletics in the Euro-Western method employed thus far because in the various societies—West, East, African, Hispanic, Oceanic and all others—there are those whose orientation is Western. However—and herein lies the problem—we need to intentionally and proactively develop homiletic models that recognize the presence of other cultures within the scope of our Churches’ activity. We need to recognize that “. . . any given culture shapes a way of life that must be seen as valid for those immersed in it.”² I believe that, demonstrated through the methods we have employed in the teaching of homiletics, we have not recognized the validity of the cultures within which our ministers are to operate.

We need to do more than just have a class in Intercultural Communication. We need to devote more than a period or two reflecting on cultural considerations. Mathema notes:

“Theological education on the African continent is led by the Holy Scriptures, but the different methods of expressing it still reflects concerns of culture which may not matter much to the average African.”³

We need to (a) follow the example of Paul and recognize that there are differences in the cultures we minister to; (b) adapt the content and *modus operandi*⁴ of our teaching as Christ did, presenting eternal, religious truth to His hearers in language and modalities they were able to understand; and (c) orientate our students to recognize that there are different approaches to

¹ Niebuhr, 30

² Kraft, 49

³ Mathema, 191

⁴ Ibid, 192

preaching, each one of them equally valid within the appropriate and relevant cultural contexts they provide for.

SUMMARY

This paper has sought to highlight the issue of the Westernised orientation of homiletics teaching in the South African context. It has attempted to point out the differences in Western and African culture and its impact on preaching and sermon construction.

The following recommendations are made:

1. An in-depth study needs to be made into the culture and worship experience of the Southern African with specific focus on culture and the transmission of faith through preaching
2. A textbook needs to be developed for the teaching of homiletics in the African culture
3. The redesigning of the homiletics curriculum is needed in which recognition is given to and provision is made for the cultural differences.

APPENDIX A
COURSE OUTLINE*

REL331 Homiletics I

1-0

A. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course lays the foundation for biblical sermon construction and delivery. It seeks to develop within the student an understanding of the process of proclaiming the Gospel within a congregational context based on biblical and communication models.

B. OUTCOMES

By the end of this course the student should:

1. have an understanding of what preaching is from a biblical perspective and its role in Christian worship
2. understand the elements of communication theory as it relates to effective transmission of religious truth
3. be able to identify the various homiletic forms
4. be able to identify the major cultural contexts in which the student is likely to operate and be acquainted with the various approaches needed in the different contexts
5. have had the opportunity to preach in a classroom and field situation.

C. PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

This course has as its point of departure the following philosophical presuppositions:

1. God as Supreme, Sovereign Creator and Ruler communicates with humankind primarily through the Bible as the authoritative, infallible, inerrant Word of God
2. Jesus Christ is God revealed in the flesh. As God Incarnate, He is the Author and Source of Salvation
3. The Holy Spirit is God who speaks through our minds and who Guides us into all Truth.

D. METHODOLOGY AND EXPECTATIONS

The course will consist of class lectures, discussions and laboratory activities. Each student is expected to attend the Theology Forums, as arranged, as well as the Pastoral Practicum course.

While this is a one credit class, two periods per week have been set aside. The schedule for the semester will be adjusted to ensure that the required number of hours is provided for with sufficient lab periods to allow for practical work.

All classes as announced must be attended. The absence policy of the College will be applied. All assignments are to be completed by the beginning of the class period on the due date. Late assignments will be accepted but no grade will be allocated. Failure to complete the preaching assignments will result in a failing grade for the class.

E. ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments will be utilized to determine whether the anticipated outcomes have been achieved:

1. short quizzes will be conducted after every four class periods of lectures to assess the students' understanding of the foregoing classes
2. a mid-term written exam will be administered covering the theoretical component of the course
3. two sermons will be submitted for evaluation
4. one sermon will be preached in class and one in a local church for grading purpose
5. a final written exam will be administered incorporating theoretical and practical elements

F. DISTRIBUTION OF GRADES AND GRADING SYSTEM

Quizzes	16%
Midterm Exam	20%
Sermons – Written	15%
Preaching – Class	12%
Preaching – Church	12%
Final Exam	25%
A	90-100%
A-	85-89%
B+	80-84%
B	75-79%
B-	70-74%
C+	65-69%
C	60-64%

G. REQUIRED READING

1. The book of Mark as found in the New Testament
2. White, E.G., *Christ's Object Lessons*, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1941
3. White, E.G., *The Sermon on the Mount*, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1940
4. Lowry, E L, *The Homiletical Plot*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975
5. Vitrano, S P, *How to Preach*, Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1991.

*This is an abbreviated course outline. The full outline will give an expanded list of recommended reading in addition to a schedule of assignments, etc.

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