

Human Sciences and Culture

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James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001. \$16.00

With the publication of this book, the move toward the hearer in recent homiletics has taken another decisive step forward. After sifting through the results of scores of interviews with cross-cultural preachers taken over a two-year period, Nieman and Rogers are able to distill a coherent pattern of homiletic wisdom for cross-cultural preaching. Although the authors seek to relate their efforts to the "New Homiletic" that emerged in the 1970s, this book actually moves far beyond the humanist understanding of "common human experience" that undergirded the New Homiletic. This book stands more in the tradition of recent books that take into account the fragmentation of experience into a multiform diversity. These include Christine Smith's *Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance*, Kathy Black's *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, Susan Bond's *Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology and Preaching*. Making use of a theological ethic of neighborliness, Nieman and Rogers invite preachers to consider cross-cultural preaching within four frames: ethnicity, class, displacement, and beliefs. They ask preachers to consider various manifestations of cultural difference through these cultural frames. Their goal is to equip preachers to understand the cultural diversity within their congregations and to develop preaching strategies that will welcome, embrace, and nurture that diversity. Each chapter deals with one of these frames and includes several "group characteristics" that preachers should study. It also offers a set of practical "preaching strategies" that grow from these characteristics.

First, the frame of *ethnicity*. After defining ethnicity as a richer, less essentialist and more deeply communal concept than race, the authors move on to describe four group characteristics that preachers should take into account within the frame of ethnicity. They are "trusting relationships" as the necessary ground for preaching, "sub-group tensions" within each larger ethnic group, the "core values" within each ethnic group, and "preaching expectations" regarding both the authority of the preacher and scripture that exist within each ethnic group. Although the preaching strategies at the end of this chapter are largely enlightened common sense, there are at least two suggestions that may not readily come to mind: the incorporation of everyday ethnic "sayings" into sermons, and the possibilities for preaching that accrue from paying careful attention to the "artistic treasures" of each ethnic group represented in the congregation.

Second, the frame of class. Every culture gives expression, in a variety of ways, to class, by which these authors mean roughly "status," "station," "rank," or "privilege." Class is not always associated, as it is within many Western capitalist societies, with economic privilege. It may be based more upon family, land ownership, religious affiliation, caste or other social variables. Class, however, does imply the formation of a certain hierarchy of groups within a culture, usually designated by "higher-class" and "lower-class." In general, this chapter does not challenge this form of social ordering, and assumes that "lower"

classes tend to be more “economically destitute” than higher classes. In most Western cultures there is a close association between education and class-status. Within the frame of class, Nieman and Rogers advise preachers to pay attention to four group characteristics. The first is “multiple identity,” the fact that there are subtle diversities of status within congregations and within a single class itself. The second characteristic is “ambiguous authority,” the fact that the authority of the preacher means something different to those of “higher” and “lower” class status. The third group trait is “thought process,” the fact that forms of reasoning are influenced by class. The final group trait is “symbolic burden,” the fact that major symbol systems such as “order,” “health,” and “security” will be understood very differently by those of different class status. The preaching strategies in this chapter move more in the direction of the New Homiletic, looking for ways to reach across class boundaries, in order to bind people together in some form of common humanity, albeit with a “liberative vision.”

Third, the frame of displacement. This chapter proves to be one of the most helpful in the book. Nieman and Rogers point out that within the larger nomadic culture of North America, in which mobility and rapid cultural change are norms, displacement or placelessness is an important cultural frame for understanding nearly every person in the pew. They point out that displacement is actually an “‘anti-culture’ cultural frame, that undermines the very benefits culture can give: ways toward identity, belonging, and action.” (86) Because of this, a new set of feelings has invaded church life, “ranging from mild discomfort to significant fear of perceived danger.” (87) Within this frame, the authors encourage preachers to pay attention to three things. The first is “hidden wounds,” the memories and feelings that people who have been displaced carry about with them all the time. The second is “perilous journeys,” the ways in which a displaced person’s narrative journey is in search of both roots and a destination. The third is “special bonds,” the ways in which displaced people connect generationally, through levels of language proficiency and unique forms of piety. Preaching strategies in this chapter encourage preachers to step into the midst of the life journeys of displaced people, offering rebuilding, redirection, and an enduring sense of spiritual place. In a very helpful section at the end of this chapter, the authors point to the ways in which biblical lament can be used to give voice to a variety of cultural displacements.

Fourth, the frame of beliefs. In this chapter, Nieman and Rogers drift back and forth between inter-religious preaching and preaching within the context of congregations in which other religious influences are present. Preachers are made aware that people in the pews bring with them beliefs that devolve from cultural and regional backgrounds that may range from Buddhism to snake handling. Oddly, this chapter is the first place where the language of “difference” and “dialogue” surfaces. The authors make use of a model of inter-religious dialogue similar to that espoused by Mark S. Heim in his book *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). Preachers are instructed to pay attention to three significant things within this cultural frame. The first is “ordinary instances,” the ways in which beliefs are woven into the fabric of everyday life. The second is “difficult barriers,” the ways in which beliefs can become barriers to understanding. The third is “welcome openings,” those places where beliefs have parallels within the Christian witness or tradition represented by the preacher. The preaching strategies in this chapter are designed to promote a dynamic form of pluralism in which both the distinctiveness and creative growth of Christian faith can be fostered through inter-religious dialogue.

In the last analysis, *Preaching to Every Pew* leads, as the authors acknowledge, to a collaborative and conversational homiletic, expanding in new ways on collaborative and conversational models already in existence. Used in conjunction with these models, this book becomes a vital, even necessary new resource.

The only issue that must be raised with this book is the notable lack of endnotes that might help the reader track these authors' obviously well researched ideas. This disturbing characteristic hopefully does not indicate that Fortress Press considers homiletics to be something less than an academically thorough and exacting enterprise. This book is written in a way that any "professional book" reader can readily understand, and endnotes would take nothing away from its readability and usefulness by the average preacher. Cudos to Nieman and Rogers for a well-written, insightful book, that advances our understanding of the way that preaching and diversity can be mutually transforming.

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