

## **Preaching to the Unseen: A Case Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Brisbane School of Theology has separate English and Chinese theological programs, but runs a number of combined events including a weekly chapel service in English. The majority of attendees at this chapel are from the English program with the Chinese students representing 15%-20% of those present. The preaching is aimed primarily at the English program students with one faculty member admitting he does little to contextualise their sermons to take the Chinese students into account. While much of the contextualisation literature since its introduction as a neologism in 1972 has had a missiological focus, in more recent years a homiletical focus has developed. An evaluation of this faculty member's homiletical approach of not taking the Chinese students sufficiently into account in light of this material revealed that it was unloving and that a more contextual approach to sermon preparation and delivery was warranted. Such an approach might include the faculty member developing deeper relationships with the Chinese students so as to better understand his audience along with his own cultural hermeneutical biases as a western, middle-aged male; using more Chinese people, places and news in illustrations; and take the collectivist and Confucianism-influenced heritage of the students into account when applying the biblical text.

### **Introduction**

Brisbane School of Theology (BST) is one of only three Colleges within the Australian College of Theology that offers theological programs in both English and Chinese (Mandarin). While BST's English-speaking program represents the majority of the student body, the Chinese-speaking program has approximately 30 students. Due to language differences the two programs are largely separate, with community between the two student groups intentionally developed through extra curricula activities such as community lunches twice a week, an annual mid-week camp, and a weekly combined chapel service. It is this weekly chapel, and in particular the preaching at this combined chapel, that is the focus of this paper.

On any given week a regular chapel service might have approximately 60 students from the English program, and 10-15 from the Chinese program.<sup>1</sup> While fellowship, unity and community are genuine goals for the combined chapel, the decision to run a combined chapel rather than separate chapels is largely pragmatic – i.e. resources and also the relatively small number of Chinese students. While the chapel services themselves are held in English, some attempt is made to make them more inclusive of the Chinese students through having the occasional prayer, Bible reading or song in Mandarin; and twice a semester having the chapel led by the Chinese students in conjunction with a Chinese faculty member. In regards preaching, Chinese faculty members preach in chapel, and so in a meaningful way our Chinese students are directly ministered to on those weeks through these skilled homileticians. Personally though, on the occasions when I preach at chapel, I make almost no attempt to adapt or contextualise my message in order to genuinely accommodate the Chinese students. They may as well not exist. They are effectively unseen to me. I prepare with the English students in mind as my target audience – which impacts my preparation, structure, approach to reasoning, presentation, illustrations, and points of application. The three issues I wish to explore in this paper are: 1. Is my current approach towards the Chinese students loving? 2. Is a more contextual approach warranted? and 3. If so, what might this look like practically for my sermon preparation and delivery?

### **Is it loving?**

In evaluating whether my approach of not taking the Chinese students into account with my preaching was loving, in the perfect timing of God, just a few days before I began writing this paper I attended a mission conference whose theme was ‘Serving the unseen.’ I had expected it to be about ‘Serving the unseen *God*.’ But it wasn’t. It was about ‘Serving unseen *people*’ i.e. serving people who are marginalised, despised, neglected, seen – but unseen (something the speaker modelled through his ministry amongst a Muslim minority group in East Asia). The text he spoke from was James 2:1-4.

1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the rest of the paper I will simply use the terms “English students” and “Chinese students” to refer to the students in the English program and Chinese program respectively.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011).

The scene is a Christian gathering where two people come in – one a rich person and one a poor person. Based on how they looked, how they smelt, and who they were connected to – they were treated very differently. Both the rich person and the poor person were noticed, but it was only the rich person who was treated with honour and respect. It was only the rich person who was treated as a human being. It was only the rich person who was really seen.

James addresses this issue and rebukes the church for such behaviour. He pulls no punches when he says that when Christians treat people in one group different to people in another group then their behaviour is discriminatory (Jas 4:2). Furthermore, he adds that not only is it discriminatory but it is unloving: *“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right”* (Jas 4:8) with the implication being that the church’s behaviour in this instance was the exact opposite of this – *unloving*. They were not loving their neighbours as themselves.

We are not told if the Christians James was writing to were intentionally being discriminatory and unloving or whether their behaviour was unintentional. Either way, their behaviour did not reflect the character of the God who they claimed to serve, the God who sees and is at work in the people they didn’t see: *“Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”* (Jas 2:5)

I don’t know who the unseen might be in your life, who you see but don’t see? For me, the Chinese students in chapel are part of the unseen in my world. For almost ten years I have preached to them in chapel. I’ve seen them, but not seen them. i.e. I’ve physically seen them, but they haven’t really registered to the point where their presence has impacted my sermon preparation or delivery.<sup>3</sup> My preaching has both lacked love and cultural intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Women are a second sub-group in chapel that might represent another set of ‘seen but unseen people’ in my preaching. To extend the evaluation of my chapel preaching, I could further consider to the degree to which I take women into account in my sermon preparation and delivery. Alice P. Matthews suggests six questions that may help preachers relate better to women in their congregations: i. Do we typecast men and women in traditional stereotyped roles? ii. Do we represent both men and women as whole human beings? i.e. do we allow men to be emotional and women logical? Men to be gentle and women direct/ confrontational? iii. Do we accord men and women the same level of respect? E.g. describe women based on physical attributes but men by their intellectual capacity or occupation? iv. Do we recognise both men and women for their own achievements? v. Does our language exclude women when we talk about humanity as a whole? i.e. use gender-neutral language vi. Do we use language that designates and describes men and women on equal terms? Alice P. Matthews, *Preaching that Speaks to Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 158-162. Matthews subsequently poses a further series of questions to accentuate her point; i. Suppose 60% of your congregation were under 25. How would that impact the way you preach? What about if 60% of your congregation were women? ii. If you use illustrations about athletes, pilots, lawyers, doctors, leaders etc., do you make many of them women? iii. When you preach narrative sections of the Bible, do you preach from the perspective of the women involved? Matthews, 163-164.

<sup>4</sup> P. Christopher Earley and Soon Ang, *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions across Cultures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12, define Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as “the capacity to deal effectively with other people with whom the person does not share a common cultural background and understanding.”

## Is a contextual approach warranted?

In evaluating whether a more contextual approach to my preaching to these students is warranted, even simply based on the royal law of loving my neighbour as myself I think the answer has to be yes. But a second reason a contextual approach is warranted is for the purpose of better contextualisation and communication.

Contextualisation has been variously defined as the activity of explaining and applying the Christian faith in ways that are relevant and understandable to those receiving the message.<sup>5</sup> In relation to homiletics, Woosung Choi states, “Contextualizing the sermon in a multiethnic context means that preachers take intentional steps to increase their cultural awareness, and in their sermonic thinking they explore how to understand better those who are culturally different from themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Much has been published concerning contextualisation since its introduction as a neologism in 1972, but the focus of the literature has been missiological rather than homiletical.<sup>7</sup> It has only been in more recent years that scholars have more intentionally sought to apply insights from the contextualisation debate to other fields – such as homiletics.<sup>8</sup>

While the term contextual preaching is sometimes used to simply mean preaching a single verse or passage of Scripture in its biblical context, most authors use the term to mean preaching that takes the audience (i.e. context) into account.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that the book of Acts records examples of the apostles engaged in contextual preaching. Sermons to a predominantly Jewish audience engaged with Old Testament texts familiar to people from a Jewish background (e.g. Acts 2, 7, 13) where sermons to a gentile audience drew on gentile poets and images familiar to that group (e.g. Acts 17).<sup>10</sup>

Timothy Keller argues that contextualisation is unavoidable in preaching. Preachers invariably make their message more accessible to some people and less to others based on the words, illustrations, mannerisms and so forth that they use.<sup>11</sup> This has certainly been the case in my

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012), 36; Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 13-14; David. J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Woosung C. Choi, “A Multiperspectival Approach: Preaching to the Multiethnic congregation,” *Trinity Journal* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 274.

<sup>7</sup> TEF Staff, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Program of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)* (Bromley: The Theological Education Fund, 1972), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018); Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Chan, *Evangelism*, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew J. Prince, *Contextualization of the Gospel: Towards an Evangelical Approach in the Light of Scripture and the Church Fathers* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 81-107.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 102. Keller, 103-120, suggests six practices for contextual preaching: a. Use accessible or well-explained vocabulary b. employ

preaching in the combined chapel. I have intentionally contextualised my sermons, but almost exclusively contextualised them towards students the English students. I've contextualised to the seen, but not to the unseen. At least, *my* unseen. I've preached to the majority, but neglected the minority.

In regards to taking minority groups into account when preaching, Matthew Kim challenges when he writes,

[Minorities] worship among us, and their diversity may not be revealed only in the hue of their skin. Diversity exists in subtle places concealed from our naked eyes. [They] sit throughout the sanctuary, hoping to hear a sermon that connects with their lives. We may have noticed them, but have they been permitted and given access to feel truly at home in our congregations? Do we prepare our sermons with them fully in our hermeneutical and homiletical views? <sup>12</sup>

Kim's words are poignant for my own preaching and challenge me to be cognisant of both the English and Chinese students in my chapel preaching and to begin thinking of chapel more as a multiethnic congregation rather than a homogenous congregation.<sup>13</sup>

### **A contextual approach to sermon preparation and delivery**

The students in BST's Chinese program are mostly first generation adults, from China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, and generally aged in their 40's and 50's. Some have lived in Australia a long period (ten years or more), some for a shorter period. Therefore the Chinese students themselves are not exactly a homogenous group. But with that caveat, consideration will now be given to what a contextual approach to sermon preparation and delivery might look like that takes the minority Chinese students into account and so demonstrates greater cultural intelligence. The foci of the recommendations will be on sermon preparation, illustrations, application, and communication.

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respected authorities to strengthen your theses c. Demonstrate an understanding of doubts and objections d. Affirm in order to challenge baseline cultural narratives e. Make gospel offers that push on the cultures pressure points f. Call for gospel motivation.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear our Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), xii.

<sup>13</sup> The literature that I have found most helpful in researching this topic has been preaching in a multiethnic context (as opposed to literature on cross-cultural preaching). An important issue that a preacher in a multi-ethnic context need to wrestle with is how they "can engage cross-culturally with the biblical text in a multiethnic context." Choi, "A Multiperspectival Approach," 273.

## Preparation

1. *Get to know the people I am preaching to and listen to their stories.* To better contextualise to my audience, I need to better know my audience. Through events such as the weekly lunches, mid-week camp, and even impromptu times seeing the Chinese students around the campus I have the opportunity to better know these students and their backgrounds. Listening to their stories and reflections will also make me more aware of and sensitive to their views on different issues. Experienced preacher to multiethnic audiences, Linnea Carnes, writes: "Preaching to a congregation of people from so many different cultures and ethnicities has forced me to listen to the stories of my listeners. I ask myself how they will hear the text from their cultural perspective and what in their experience will affect the way they hear this story."<sup>14</sup> Lisa Lamb, poignantly illustrates this point when she writes of an incident she witnessed at her church:

Sarah, a slender Cambodian, shyly approached the microphone, a map of Africa on the screen behind her. "I have been asked to lead the congregation in prayer for Sudan today," she said softly, "because I too have lived through genocide." In my pew, I gasped internally. I'd chatted over coffee after church with Sarah several times—How was it I had never learned that traumatic part of her history? As I reflected on it later, my questions as a preacher were: How has that past formed Sarah as a hearer of the word? What does she hear with more clarity and what is harder for her to hear because of the memories she carries? How might I preach differently, knowing that Sarah is in the pew?<sup>15</sup>

Knowing my audience at a deeper level and some of the events that have shaped their lives will help me to be more aware of my cultural biases and their impact on my interpretation of any given text. Woosung Choi explains that "[w]hen studying a text, the preacher must be alert for the influence of his or her own cultural tradition and life experience."<sup>16</sup> As I am studying a biblical text I need to be more conscious that I am not coming to the text as a neutral interpreter but as a Caucasian, Australian, middle-aged male. I need to think through how someone from an Asian culture (as well as the Australian culture I'm preaching to) might interpret the text. Choi further illustrates this point when he writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Linnea E. Carnes, "One Voice Among Many: Preaching in a Multiethnic Congregation," *The Covenant Quarterly* 65 no. 3 (Aug 2007): 7.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa W. Lamb, "To Remember Well Together: Preaching and Memory in Ethnically Diverse Congregations," *Word & World* 28 no. 4 (Fall 2008): 424.

<sup>16</sup> Choi, "A Multiperspectival Approach," 280. David Lim suggests the preacher ask himself the following questions during their preparation: 1. How would those from a different life situation/ cultural background interpret this biblical text? 2. What excites them, and what do they fear? 3. Which illustrations will most connect with listeners? 4. What applications will be specific to their context? 5. How can we embrace and even celebrate those who are different from us in our preaching ministry? Lim, *Preaching*, xiii.

Careful listening to people will certainly help broaden and deepen the preacher's understanding of the text. The preacher pays attention to thematic emphases that a particular passage may have that relates to a certain cultural group. The preacher also notes any symbols, imagery, themes, and word meanings that might prompt a cultural connection, as well as stories that might help the congregation to understand the biblical text better. For example, 1 Cor 8 addresses the issue of food sacrificed to idols in the Corinthian church. If the congregation includes both Caucasians and Asians, it may be helpful for the preacher to present how to approach this text from both cultural perspectives. Those who are from the West may find it difficult to identify with the subject of offering food to idols, whereas for many Asians whose cultures practice ancestor worship, this could be an important and challenging issue.<sup>17</sup>

A further way that I could incorporate an Asian perspective as a regular part of my sermon preparation would be to consult commentaries and monographs written and edited by Asian scholars. Some recent publications that do that in a very readable and accessible format are the *South Asia Bible Commentary* and *Asia Bible Commentary* series. The *South Asia Bible Commentary* has been developed in cooperation with Langham Partnership and Open Door Publications and is a one-volume commentary on the entire Bible.<sup>18</sup> The Asia Theological Association (ATA) are also progressively publishing individual commentaries on biblical books in their *Asia Bible Commentary* series.<sup>19</sup>

2. *Utilise narrative texts and narrative preaching more frequently.*<sup>20</sup> At one level, everyone loves a good story. We get drawn in to the narrative, the characters, the plot.<sup>21</sup> But, while something of a generalisation, the western mindset tends to prefer linear thinking (organised, structured, logical), while the eastern mind prefers circular reasoning- coming back to the same point multiple times, considering it from different angles. Utilising narrative texts, and preaching using a first or third person narrative approach may be particularly appreciated by the Chinese students.

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<sup>17</sup> Choi, "A Multiperspectival Approach," 281.

<sup>18</sup> *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. B. C. Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> For example, see: Federico Villanueva and Joseph Too Shao, *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary* (Manilla: ATA, 2013); Shirley Ho and Feng Yi Lin, *Psalms 73-150: A Contextualised Commentary for Asian Readers* (Manilla: ATA, 2013); Tan Kim Huat, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Manilla: ATA, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> For a helpful recent text on preaching Old Testament narratives see Benjamin H. Walton, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form Expanded Edition* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 13.

## *Illustrations*

As highlighted earlier, a preacher's choice of illustrations will invariably make their message more accessible to some and less accessible to others. There are a number of things that I could do regarding illustrations in my sermons that would make them more inclusive of the Asian students in chapel. First, I could broaden my choice of illustrations through incorporating illustrations that tap into a Chinese world-view, such as family, food, hospitality, harmony, relationships, celebrations and festivals. Second, I could include Chinese people and Chinese stories in my illustrations rather than referring to exclusively Western people. Some examples could include Asian missionaries, Asian leaders, Asian history, news items from Asia or that address Asian issues.<sup>22</sup> Relatedly, I could have Chinese people as the positive example in some of the illustrations. As much as I might admire William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon, Amy Carmichael, and Timothy Keller – Dora Yu, Shi Meiyu, John Sung, Watchman Nee, and Wu Baoying could equally be used as positive illustrations of authentic Christian living.

## *Application*

Behind our preaching should be an unswerving passion for God's name to be honoured and God's glory to be proclaimed.<sup>23</sup> It is so easy to make the mistake of thinking that addressing the felt needs of our audience is the main purpose of preaching. The goal of preaching however is not that. Rather, it is to prayerfully communicate God's words, for the glory of God, with the Holy Spirit applying those words to the hearts of the hearers.<sup>24</sup> Mindful of the Spirit's role in application, there are a number of things that I could seek to do in my application of the biblical text to the Chinese students in chapel.

*1. Work harder on the 'we' not just the 'I' in application.* Chinese culture tends towards being more collectivist than individualistic i.e. it thinks 'we before I' where Western culture thinks 'I before we.' People from an eastern background have a greater tendency to make group decisions, or fall in with the decision of the group (e.g. family members) – which can have significant implications for evangelism. So my application will need to explain and demonstrate the plausibility of living out a particular point of application in a group context as

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<sup>22</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/asia> is one site dedicated to Asian news events.

<sup>23</sup> John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 20.

<sup>24</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 208; cf. Phillip D. Jensen and Paul Grimmond, *The Archer and the Arrow: Preaching the Very Words of God* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2010), 22.

well as how they can live as Christians while still honour their parents and broader family network.<sup>25</sup>

2. *Emphasise grace, not just works.* Confucianism<sup>26</sup> emphasises works and morality whereby people act out more of duty and obligation based on *Li* (the Chinese hierarchical ordering of relationships).<sup>27</sup> The gospel, however, emphasises that the Christian is accepted by grace and not by works or obligation, and that a Christian's good works are a response to God's gracious work rather than done simply out of duty or to gain favour. Preaching that emphasises grace and the responsive nature of good works will be a helpful corrective to the works-emphasis of Confucianism.

### *Communication*

As many of our Chinese students do not speak English as their first language (EFL), there are a number of things I could do in regards my communication to serve them. First, by speaking more slowly, enunciating words more clearly, and using shorter sentences. Second, avoid using idioms and clichés that are meaningless to people from other cultures (e.g. 'kick the bucket', 'over the hill', 'old man').<sup>28</sup> Third, be more visual through using images and props. Pictures can be understood more easily than spoken English, and key points projected from a data projector will give students the opportunity to read and check whether they have heard correctly.

### **Conclusion**

Ed Stetzer challenges, "Are you communicating in such a way that your words actually convey biblical truth to your audience? Or does your preaching float right past your hearers because it's not delivered "on a frequency" that they listen to?"<sup>29</sup> The mission speaker I referred to earlier in this paper made the point that serving the unseen requires cost and mess – echoing Livermore's observation that "embodying Jesus cross-culturally is a messy,

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<sup>25</sup> For further see Jeanette Yep (ed.), *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> The term Confucianism was first thought to be coined during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by Jesuit missionaries who saw a strong correlation between the values they observed among Chinese officials and some of the classical texts of Confucianism. Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC) was a Chinese teacher, politician and philosopher but Confucian values pre-date Confucius himself. What Confucius did was "to collect, organize and highlight the beliefs and practices that had been definitive of his culture for several centuries." These ideals, behaviours, and values include: the veneration/respect of ancestors; education (esp. in history and culture); development of harmonious, hierarchical relationships (especially in family and social life). Randall L. Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 22-24.

<sup>27</sup> Those relationships are: Father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife, subject-ruler, older friend-younger friend. Yingqin Liu, "Cultural factors and rhetorical patterns in classical Chinese argumentation," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 199.

<sup>28</sup> Carnes, "One Voice Among Many," 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> [https://servingstrong.typepad.com/main/skills\\_technique/page/2/Mar 17](https://servingstrong.typepad.com/main/skills_technique/page/2/Mar 17)

complicated process.”<sup>30</sup> Seeking to preach contextually in a multiethnic context in a way that embodies high cultural intelligence will be messy and require extra work. But by being prepared to do this hard work, not only will I be more likely to avoid discrimination towards but also demonstrate love to those Chinese students I am preaching to.

#### **About the author**

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<sup>30</sup> Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*, 34.