

Gospel Sharing in Pluralist Society Today: Toward a New Homiletic

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1. Introduction

How should we interpret biblical texts inclusively, especially those that have been used exclusively? What could be the hermeneutics and homiletics in a religious pluralist society today? These are the questions that are being debated by theologians in Asia in general and in India in particular. Christian preachers are to address this problem as well. The phenomenon of religious pluralism and the bewildering cultural diversity, which is so characteristic of India, is being accepted as a part of the historical reality, not only to be tolerated and accommodated but also to be treated as part of the ethos for co-existence and mutual enrichment of all people. From the stand point of biblical, theological and homiletical perspectives, different positions have been developed towards people of other faiths. The understanding and the use of the Bible to a great extent determines different positions. In the Bible particularly in the New Testament, there are a variety of responses to religious pluralism varying from tolerance to aloofness, to condemnation of the adherents of other faiths. The following texts reveal the different attitudes: John 3.16; 2Pet.3.9; Acts 17.23-24; Acts 10-11; 1Cor.7.12-13; Math.15.21-28; Mark 16.16; 2Cor.6.14-17, etc. The attitude of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels, the approach of Paul in his letters and other apostles to the Greeks and Romans of that time might have been determined by such factors as the cultural ethos, historical context, the theological notions and sectarian interests. Their responses have been taken as definitive, determinative and absolute models for all time by some theologians and preachers. At least two outstanding positions in the churches with regard to preaching can be historically traced.

a. An Exclusive Position

Since the great missionary times of, 18th and 19th centuries, Christianity has been considered by and large as the only true religion and other religions as false by Christians. Therefore the people of other faiths were to be converted to Christianity. This position was strengthened and perpetuated by Christian preaching inspired by texts like Mark 16.15; John 14.6 and Acts 4.12 etc. The theology of preaching based on these texts continues in the church by the evangelicals through revival meetings as well as Christian literature. The existence of other religions is viewed as an undesirable impediment in the way of the spread of the Gospel. This is the predominant position of the Church on the whole in India today. Many of the churches keep evangelism as number one priority. "Mission, Conversion and Baptism" is the pattern of ministry of those who take this exclusive position. The purpose of mission through preaching according to this view is to convert people and make them Christians by baptism. The power of the Gospel for transformation of individuals and communities cannot be denied. Certainly the possibility of conversion is not ruled out. However, this position raises serious questions in the pluralist society. It is offensive to the people of other faiths. This has led to the isolation of the Church from the people of other faiths. (Of course the caste factor plays a major role in the separation of communities). But the exclusive position of some of the theologians and pastors is seen as imperialistic on the part of the Church by the people of other faiths. The acceptance of plurality of religions drastically alters the exclusive positions. It has important implications for the preaching of the Gospel.

b. An Inclusive Position

As missionary movement spread and missionaries came in close contact with other religions and cultures, some of them realized that the other religions are not false but they do have certain values. These religions were considered as only preparations for Christianity. Christ is unique and whatever good, true and beautiful in all cultures and religions belong to Christ. This kind of inclusive phase continues in the church though on a small scale through Christian preaching and writings. Vatican II affirmed this position that other religions do have revelatory character. Quite a few Christians irrespective of denominational variances hold on to this view. Though conversion leading to baptism is not ruled out, those who hold on to this position are less aggressive than the ones who go by the exclusive position. Most preachers are comfortable with this position. But this is also considered to be highly offensive by the people of other faiths.

Pluralist society has been described as "one where people of different religions, cultures and ideological commitments, of languages, regions and ethnic groups, live and work together in the larger community sharing the Joys and burdens of human existence." Besides religious and cultural diversities, there are human concerns that cut across religious or ideological boundaries. They are both important and urgent because they touch matters of human well-being. The struggle of oppressed people in every community for a life of freedom, self-respect and human dignity; the concern for a healthy environment that goes beyond ecological questions to the quest for a new theology of creation that can hold together humanity, nature and God; the demand for a new spirituality, particularly among young people who are dissatisfied with doctrines and institutions of religions. It is both a challenge and an opportunity for Christian theologians and preachers to understand and interpret the Gospel in a more acceptable and appropriate way.

The question posed: Does the imperative of the pluralist context have implications for the sources and the forms of preaching?

2. Shift in Approach and Attitude

Since the World War II with the rise of secularism, (as understood in India proposes the equality and respect of all religions), a more sympathetic and tolerant attitude to people of other faiths is being adopted. Lately there has been a genuine desire to formulate a relevant theology of religions. Re-reading of the Bible and other Scriptures has shown that other religions also contain the revelation of God (Psalms 87.4; Amos 9.7; Acts. 14.17 etc.). Other religions are accepted as ways of salvation. This is the new stage of dialogue and mutual learning and sharing of religious experience. Mission is two ways - preaching as well as listening; teaching as well as learning. We have not yet grasped the length and breadth and depth and height of the Gospel. We need to discover more about Jesus Christ and God from others. This position is debated in theological circles but yet to take off in Christian preaching. We need now a new theology of preaching, a new hermeneutic for interpretation and a new homiletic for preaching with emphasis on building communities of love and Justice; to face challenges of life here and now collectively and responsibly. We need to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ but with respect to other religions and cultures. The time has come to discern God's revelation and activity in all creation. We need to strengthen our people in the fundamentals of Christian faith. But at the same time do not forget the universality of God's love. The question is — How can this be done? Precisely here we need to talk about a common quest for appropriate preaching. How can we transform the traditional preaching into a more dynamic and creative moment? How can we preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in today's pluralist and secular world? All these questions call for a new exercise in Homiletics. We need to find a new hermeneutic for the interpretation of the Gospel in the present day pluralist world. Christian preachers need to take seriously the implications of secularism (respect to and equality of all religions) as propagated by the state, the existence of plurality of religions, for the life of the Church in its mission and ministry. In the days of growing communalism and fundamentalism, including Christian fundamentalism or sectarianism, Christian preaching needs to take a stand in the struggle to preserve the secular and pluralist character of humanity. Traditional Christian interpretation either of exclusivism or inclusivism would not function in the pluralist context. The Church particularly its preachers and theologians need to have a more open attitude. Re-reading and re-interpretation of the Christian Scriptures, particularly a fresh look at the exclusive texts as well as the inclusive texts (Micah 4.2; Malachi 1.11 etc.) review of lectionary texts of various churches; reading of the other Scriptures with openness and humility; will help in fostering one humanity and one world thinking in a divided world based on religions, cultures and other social distinctions. Certainly pluralist society is not something to be accepted without a critique. But this new context demands new interpretation of the Gospel. Many of the pastors are confused and do not know how to go about in the pluralist society. There are problems of the content as well as form of the Gospel proclamation.

3. Towards a New Homiletic

Constructing a hermeneutical and pastoral bridge between Christian preaching and life situation in the emerging pluralist society like India is not an easy task. There are difficulties such as disagreement among Christians - Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants on matters of faith, which includes the question of the authority of the Bible, the place of Christianity among other religions, theology and the form of baptism; and above all the content and the form of the message of Christian preaching in a pluralist situation. It is a fact that people in congregations of the Church are more in touch with the life in the pluralist society i.e. in schools, colleges, offices and other places of work including agriculture and farming than the Christian preachers who preach to them. Time has come for most Christian preachers to come out of their isolation in order to develop more positive relationship with their neighbors for the

purpose of working together for the common good of humanity in the society for its betterment and for integrity of creation. The need of the hour is to equip the members of the Church to have a more open attitude to the people of other faiths. Preaching plays a vital role in influencing people. Great deal of responsibility lies with preachers.

Time has come for the church to overcome their feelings of isolation from their neighbors of other faiths and ideologies. Members of the churches need to develop a more positive attitude towards them, which can lead to co-operation for common good of the society and creation at large. Obviously, far more work has to be done in this area. What we need is an open hermeneutical understanding, deeper theological reflection and pastoral sensitivity, more enthusiasm and religious imagination with critical concern. We need to have respect for religions. To appreciate the good in them and as far as possible, to view them as an insider and not from the outside. There is no need to compromise one's faith. The place and role of Jesus Christ as it is proclaimed through Christian preaching in God's plan of salvation is unique to the Christians. Other savior figures are also unique to their own religions and communities. The mystery of God and that of the Trinity cannot be exhausted by the Church. And therefore we can learn from other religions because there can be God's revelation in them too. There has to be inter-religious dialogue where we listen and learn from others in a true spirit of sharing and genuine openness. The Church lives in a pluralist society. This needs to be accepted as a fact of life. The Church needs to theologize through its reflection on the praxis of living our faith along with people of other faiths. For the development of one's personality and growth, one would have to belong to one particular community or church or fellowship. But at the same time, one needs to be open to the people of other faiths. This is the challenge for the Church today in a pluralist context. Great responsibility rests on preachers and theologians to articulate the faith of the Church and interpret the Gospel in a more appropriate manner conducive to the thinking of the times.

We need to work on the new homiletic for the preaching of the Gospel in the pluralist societies in the modern world, with special reference to India. There is need for the development of new homiletic to communicate the Gospel without offending the people of other faiths. Since pluralism is one of the crucial issues to be pursued among the existing communal, racial and fundamental forces, it is of paramount importance to work out a new homiletic for the preaching of the Gospel. Christian preaching both inside and outside of the Church in India is one of the major theological issues of inter-religious relations. The issue needs particular attention by the theologians and pastors who are the preachers of the Gospel in India. An in depth study of the exclusive as well as the inclusive biblical texts along with current theological thinking on the pluralist context for the preaching of the Gospel needs to be made, in order to provide guidelines for preachers. The question of the use of other Scriptures; and the question of the use of traditional styles of communication of other faith communities also need our attention

Examples of New Homiletics

The Story of Noah's Ark, which has been traditionally interpreted as the ark of salvation in the inclusive sense. The traditional exegesis emphasizes the chosen family that was saved when the rest of human kind was destroyed in the flood. Later on, in the history of the Church, this was used claiming that the Church itself is now the ark of salvation leading to the affirmation that outside our pluralist society Christian preaching often suggests that unless our neighbors of other faiths get into Church, they will perish. But a re-reading of it in the light of its use in the New Testament throws different light. In the Epistle to the Hebrews Noah is mentioned as an example of steadfast faith (Heb 11:7). Luke mentions Noah to emphasize the human genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:36). Jesus uses the story in connection with the parousia as a warning, to be vigilant and watchful. "As in the days of Noah so will be in the days of the Son of Man" (Luke 17.26), The other example could be the story of Lot's wife looking back and interpreted traditionally as disobedience. But an alternative motive as to why she looked back can be given. One of the reasons why she looked back might be because she loved her neighbors so much that, the thought of their dying was agonizing to her. Rather than a sign of disobedience, her looking back was a sign of her love and identification with her neighbors. Her love for her neighbors overcame her fear of disobeying an order to the point of death.

Another example is the story of the ship wreck in Acts 27 during Paul's last missionary Journey. The ship was a Greek ship with a Greek crew and Roman soldiers were taking a group of prisoners, of whom Paul and his friends were a tiny Christian minority. It was indeed a pluralist community in the ship. What happened when the storm broke is well known. But we need to note some significant points. First, Paul identifies himself with his fellow passengers. They were all in the same boat. Second, Paul does not proclaim the Gospel to them as some other preachers might have done, noting that it was the right moment to bring them the message of life before being drowned. Third, Paul brings in a note of compassion, for he asks the soldiers not to throw the prisoners overboard for fear they might escape.

Fourth, Paul brings to all of them, including Christians, a message of Hope: "I now bid you take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship" (Acts 27.22). This then is a different kind of ark of salvation because the ark itself is lost, but all the people in it, including Christians were saved. The text even mentions the number two hundred and seventy six persons in the ship (Acts 27,37). The particularity of Christian presence is not abandoned but the universality of God's love that reaches out to save all people is recognized. Thus a familiar story provides new exegetical and homiletical openings for our times.

There are other passages and themes in the Bible which can be interpreted differently in the pluralist society. Christian preachers need to draw their attention to the more open attitudes implied in the Biblical teaching to which scarcely any attention is being given either in teaching or in preaching. It will be an endeavor worth pursuing to study many such passages in the Bible in order to find out new exegetical and expositional insights for Christian preaching in the pluralist societies.

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