



Crossover Preaching: Intercultural – Improvisational Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor, by Jared E. Alcántara (IVP, 2015).



Jared Alcántara of Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary begins with an assumption that preachers “already strive to be gospel centered, biblically tethered, exegetically proficient, theological competent, and spiritually mature.” He wants to build on these basics and challenge preachers to “transgress” the boundary of their own cultural identity. His aim is to prepare improvisational-intercultural preachers for today’s cultural diversity.

In *Crossover Preaching*, Alcántara develops what it means to transgress one’s cultural identity for the sake of the gospel. He advocates “intercultural competence,” that is “the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and habits for effectively negotiating cultural, racial, ethnic, and ecclesial difference” (34). He finds in Gardner C. Taylor a forerunner of the “improvisational proficiency and intercultural proficiency” (38) that he is after. Taylor, the influential African-American preacher, who was the pastor of the prestigious Concord Baptist Church of Christ (1948-1990) in Brooklyn, modeled effective crossover preaching. Taylor was rooted, but not limited by his “blackness.” He crossed cultural boundaries by reaching out beyond his culture and by drawing on various traditions.

Taylor’s carefully crafted sermons were memorized and delivered as written, but in the “unforeseen, unplanned moments” and guided by the Holy Spirit, Taylor had the freedom and the relational ability to improvise and make the intercultural connection (135). Robert Smith defines improvisation as “spontaneity infused by preparation” (116). Alcántara is concerned to show that in seminaries “where the manuscript tradition is privileged,” students need to learn to become “more intuitive and interactive before the sermon and during the sermon” (136).

Alcántara commends Taylor for not being defined by his “blackness.” He was rooted in his African-American identity but not restricted by it. Alcántara calls Taylor’s improvised negotiation of race “transgressive blackness” (142). Taylor’s theology and preaching is in contrast to James H. Cone’s black liberation theology with its “this-worldly Christology.” Cone’s theology is built on the ontological reality of blackness and the perpetual resentment and resistance to the enduring oppressiveness of whites. It should be pointed out that if the assumptions Alcántara makes at the outset are true for Gardner Taylor and for his readers (gospel centered, biblically grounded, exegetically accurate, and theologically wise), then it would be impossible to be defined by one’s ethnicity and cultural identity. If we are truly gospel centered then faithfulness and fruitfulness will go hand-in-hand, along with an “improvisational aptitude and action across racial and cultural differences” (159).

If we are gospel centered then we will experience the freedom and the Spirit-inspired necessity of

proclaiming the gospel in a way that defies the predictability of our cultural, regional, and denominational identities. Like the Lord Jesus we will have a distinctive voice - one that cannot be explained by our cultural circumstances. Alcántara writes,

“To be a transgressor of modern racialized reasoning is to be a border crosser – a crossover preacher – one who defies circumscription through expanding existing boundaries and breaking and remaking norms. In Taylor, we find these characteristics: he refuses to be sealed off by narrow depictions of blackness; he ruptures idolizing, essentialist reifications of race; and he breaks and remakes homiletical norms [speaking “blackese,” centering on black normativity, insisting on a black homiletical form, and a set view of what constitutes a “black sermon”]. . . .Although Taylor understands blackness as a significant category, a gift from God worthy of celebration, he refuses to let blackness define him in an exhaustive, ultimate, or final way. . . .Thus we say that Taylor, at least in a sense, decenters a false center in order to recenter himself on the One who is the true center. . . .Instead of decentering the gospel so that he might center on being black, he decenters blackness so that he might center on the gospel” (190).

Transgressing boundaries describes what happened to the early church’s model preacher and missionary, the apostle Paul. Before he met Jesus Christ on the Damascus road, Paul took great pride in his ethnic and cultural heritage. He excelled in his religious understanding, practice, and zeal. But then he overcame his locked-in cultural identity when he encountered the risen Christ and everything in his life was recentered. He replaced his confidence in the flesh with his confidence in Christ. He wrote, “Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Phil 3:3-8).

The apostle Paul articulated the freedom of crossover preaching this way: “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Alcántara uses Gardner C. Taylor’s intercultural proficiency as a model for all gospel preachers today. It is “the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and habits for effectively negotiating cultural, racial, and ecclesial difference.” Taylor was committed to a dynamic synergy of “knowledge acquisition [know your own culture well and engage in strategic thinking about other cultures], behavioral aptitude [cultivate the motivation to learn the skills necessary to communicate interculturally], and transgressive action [modify behavior to show respect for other cultures]” (194-207). This does not mean compromising the gospel or “custom fitting the gospel itself to the needs” of the culture. Alcántara uses Paul’s personal self-surrender of his rights to make this

point. Paul was willing to decenter himself for the sake of the gospel (207). The behavior modification involved is not for the sake of pragmatic success, and in no way compromises the gospel. Paul is willing to do all things “for the sake of the gospel.” It goes without say that he is unwilling to do anything that would in any way jeopardize the gospel. Alcántara summarizes:

“This means that the Christian is called to be the first person to walk across the room and stretch out the hand of friendship to the one who is culturally different. Christian discipleship requires transgressing the borders of difference with those who are other-than-oneself” (208).

The “actualization of intercultural competence proficiency” is acquired over time through the preacher’s passive experiences and intentional decisions. Alcántara traces this acquisition of insight and adaptation in Taylor’s life beginning with his childhood in Baton Rouge and his college years at Leland College, an all-black junior college. One particular story stands out. Taylor was a driver for the president of the college and one day he was involved in a serious car accident in Baker, thirteen miles outside of Baton Rouge. A Ford Model T cut across the highway and caused a major accident involving Taylor’s car and killing one person. The only two witnesses were white, a poor farmer and an oil refinery worker. Taylor feared the worst and in the segregated South in 1937 he had reason to. But the two white men showed up in court and told the exact truth of what happened. Taylor was exonerated. The incident proved to be a turning point in Taylor’s life. Alcántara writes, “This life-changing event not only reoriented him toward a different vocational calling; it arguably reshaped his perception of those in the majority culture” (213).

Taylor went on to attend Oberlin School of Theology, a predominately white school, where he spent hours and hours in the library reading sermons published in *The Christian Century* and *The Christian Century Pulpit*. Taylor comments, “I found sometimes in them, something kindred to my own sense of the language and my sense of the gospel.” As a pastor in New York City Taylor was committed to ecumenical cooperation. He used to say, “We can do so much more for the kingdom together than we can separate” (216). Taylor demonstrated a significant commitment to understanding and relating to “the majority culture” effectively. He resonated with preachers “who have escaped the boundaries of habitation, who are able to address people with the gospel that does not belong to an ethnic dimension” (228). One of the key reason for Taylor’s intercultural competence, according to Alcántara, was his theological commitment to gospel-centricity (230).

Alcántara offers a biblical and theological rationale for intercultural competence. His examples include Israel’s regard for the stranger and foreigner, the book of Jonah, the celebration of God’s rule among the nations in the Psalms, and God’s vision for shalom in the prophets. In the New Testament Alcántara points to the inclusiveness of the gospel, the mission of the church, and the eschatological vision of the end. This leads Alcántara to conclude that “Taylor’s two main motivations for becoming all things to all people are grounded in love for people and commitment to the gospel” (231). Taylor’s gospel-centricity is rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation. Taylor says, “that not even God could get to us without getting with us. Indeed, this

is the gospel of Immanuel – God with us” (233).

Alcántara sums up Taylor’s logic:

“If God is willing to risk much, to embrace specificity by taking on the vulnerability and frailty of the human condition in Jesus Christ, then how much of a risk is it really for preachers to become all things to all people for the gospel’s sake? If God risks everything to become, then preachers should be willing to risk something to become. For the sake of the gospel and ones called to *imitatio Christi*, preachers must be willing to risk becoming like those to whom they preach, to get to God’s people by getting with God’s people” (234).

When Alcántara moves to “putting flesh to bones” he returns to his opening assumptions. Seminaries are already teaching biblical, theological, and spiritual proficiency. What is missing is the cultivation of “improvisational and intercultural proficiency” (238). His concern to bring Taylor’s improvisational-intercultural approach to bear on contemporary crossover preaching is important. He is after the creativity and spontaneity that comes from a deeply internalized sermon preached in such a way that the Spirit-inspired gospel envelopes the space, embraces the people, and triggers a visceral response. Alcántara draws on my colleague Dr. Robert Smith Jr’s “admonition to prepare notes *on* the page *before* the sermon in order to play notes *off* the page *during* the sermon. Such internalization encourages students to let the Holy Spirit ‘*turn the ink of the manuscript into the blood of spiritual passion*’” (242, see Smith, *Doctrine That Dances*, 153).

When I was a pastor in Bloomington, Indiana, our church was only a few blocks from IU’s famed school of music. Several doctoral students in piano attended our church and played for worship. They were all excellent musicians who played beautifully, but there were two types. One type played the score to perfection. They read and memorized the sheet music. But another type could not only read and memorize the score, they also improvised. My favorite musician played in restaurants and bars before coming to IU. He could play the score and he could play by ear. It always seemed like the music was in him, not just before him, and when he played for worship he brought a dynamic to the worship that was special. My sense is that Alcántara is after this improvisational - intercultural dynamic in our preaching.

Alcántara calls for crossover preachers who are true to their cultural identity but even truer to their identity in Christ, faithful to the cultural dynamic of the Bible and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. These preaching ethnographers are savvy, creative, self-sacrificing communicators of the gospel; disciples who transgress boundaries for the sake of the gospel, so that by all means they might save some.

Doug Webster
Beeson Divinity School