INVITATIONAL PREACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY
(PREACHING FOR A RESPONSE)

Dr. Roberto Escamilla
Associate Professor
of World Evangelism
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
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As we approach a new millennium—according to the Christian reckoning of time—and prepare for the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in the midst of dramatic changes in geo-politics, commerce, demographics, cultural values, and education. These changes are trumpeted by such various phrases as the New World Order, the Information Age, Computer Age, Multiculturalism, the Technological Age, the Permissive Society, Religious Pluralism, the Throw-away society, the Post-Modern Era, and so on. We need to hear Moltmann saying, "The present time of believers is no longer determined by the past, it takes its definition from the future."

A burning issue for many institutions and especially the church nowadays is how to remain viable and relevant amidst the cultural upheavals of contemporary society, to maintain the integrity of their mission and at the same time to preserve the valuable lessons that may be learned from traditions of the past.

I have entitled my lecture "Invitational Preaching in the 21st Century". Undoubtedly you are aware that the phrase "Invitational Preaching" carries with it strong connotations of what is called "the old time religion", of revival meetings accompanied by emotional outpourings through singing and clapping on the part of the congregation and shouting and arm waving on the part of the preacher. But I would like to maintain that there is a vital core to this tradition that should not be abandoned but nevertheless an attempt should be made to make the proclamation of the gospel relevant amid the changes in contemporary society in this post-modern world. The question is how to offer costly grace to a culture that seeks high quality but small indulgences.¹

To carry out that mission it behooves us to be aware of significant changes in attitudes toward, and practices of, religion in our multi-cultural New World Order. Knowledge of other faiths, of non-Christian ideologies, of new religions, of recurrent conflicts between religions and even among denominations will contribute an understanding

¹See Leonard Sweet's Faithquakes.
of our own mission in the "altered landscapes" of today's culture (Marty).

Looking closer to home, we have witnessed the fascination, in America at least, of Buddhism and other Eastern religions, of Transcendental Meditation and New Age Thought. Native Americans are trying to revitalize long suppressed indigenous religions. The Religious Right makes its clout felt in political elections. In large urban areas drive-in churches and vast new glassed-in Protestant "cathedrals" draw large crowds at the same time that attendance declines, especially among younger people, in many established denominations. Store-front "temples", "synagogues", and "cathedrals" crop up in inner city ghettoes, while the affluent seek relief in secular therapies and self-help groups.

We should not be judgmental in trying to learn from these movements in contemporary society. It seems to me that among other things they signify a search for meaning and purpose. People are searching for something to fill a void in their souls, an emptiness in their lives. Many are fed up with sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drugs, Prozac and sleeping pills and other aspects of our highly permissive society. Many want to know what the Gospel has to offer. At issue is how to communicate the Gospel to the modern secularized mind in a way that makes sense to men and women without compromising and abandoning the fundamental tenets of Christianity. This, I wish to suggest, is a need that can be filled by Invitational Preaching. Therefore I would like to convey a general understanding of what is meant by Invitational Preaching, and then discuss in some detail the role of the preacher, of his/her message and factors in delivering the message so that it may have an impact in contemporary society. As Leonard Sweet has said repeatedly. "We need to open our hearts to the needs of the day and do our best to address them."

I based this lecture on the basic assumption and belief that despite the bewildering ambivalence in which we find ourselves as a church, there is still hope.

In this endeavor one must appropriate whatever wisdom may be found in secular culture (secular literature, science, and philosophy) and
"plunder the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:18-36)\(^2\) and thus, enhance the effectiveness of our preaching for a response.

Dr. Albert Outler is right, addressing a fairly recent past, when he asserts that "This is a baffling time, a difficult time in which to proclaim the good news of God in Christ as credible and relevant." Then, he adds, "Although our circumstances are radically different from Wesley's--it is the sort of crisis that he would have tried heroically to comprehend, confident that the perennial gospel still offers to us in the twentieth century the same eternal truth and hope he himself had proved it had for eighteenth century Englishmen: not only the lively hope of heaven, but also a credible hope for a meaningful life in this age (and any age) whatever its crises between theology and culture."\(^3\)

Dr. Outler in his wisdom continues to help us understand the contemporary situation stating that, "Human life must be lived in and by grace or else it will be lived gracelessly and ungraciously and death will find us not only vulnerable but literally hopeless. Autonomous humanity is foredoomed to hollow triumph--to aspirations forever thwarted, to victories that wreak havoc and that leave the victors still unfulfilled."\(^4\)

In the midst of the spiritual chaos of our contemporary world, there is indeed a desperate need for the type of preaching that provides genuine spirituality and at the same time, enables women and men to rediscover the meaning of comfort, joy, peace, mercy and especially forgiveness. Thus, the essential need for what I'm identifying as Invitational Preaching or preaching for a response.

Invitational Preaching is not necessarily a new kind of preaching. As a matter of fact, it has existed since the beginning of the ministry of Jesus when he first issued the call and invited his disciples to come and follow him. (Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17) This identical concept appears also when he issued a call to all who are weary and heavy-laden. (Matthew 11:28) Furthermore, in a rather specific way, the invitation takes place also when He stood on the final day of The

\(^2\)All Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.


\(^4\)Ibid. p. 113.
Feast and said in a loud voice. "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.... (John 7:37)

Undoubtedly, we find this type of invitational preaching in the pages of the Old Testament as well. We hear, for instance, the prophet Isaiah extending an invitation and saying, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters..... (Isaiah 55:1)

The fundamental question, during Wesley's time as well as ours, was and is, "Who shall deliver me from this bondage?" (Romans 7:24) The answer, Wesley gave was: "Christ and Him crucified" (Christus crucifix, Christus Redemptor, Christus Victor). (I Corinthians 1:23)

I'm writing on this subject with the hope of rediscovering the meaning and importance of this type of preaching in our time and into the 21st century.

In characterizing Invitational Preaching and its efficacy in times of dramatic social changes, I would like to appeal to historical precedent, indeed a precedent that has ties to this university. As you know the Industrial Revolution of eighteenth-century England brought about upheavals in demographics and economics not altogether unlike changes wrought by the Technological Revolution of our own time. The Industrial Revolution was getting underway when John Wesley, while a student at Oxford, organized the Holy Club in 1729 in the context of a revered tradition of piety and learning. Later, on May 24, 1738, he had a "heart warming" experience of the Holy Spirit which transformed his life. The reference in his journal is the "locus classicus" in the annals of Methodism: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly.....I felt my heart strangely warmed.....I felt I did trust Christ....."

Subsequently Wesley began to talk about the vitality of experienced religion in contrast to legalism and intellectualism. He felt compelled to proclaim that the Holy Spirit is a power capable of transforming people into new creations and setting them on a path of holy living. This strong emphasis on the efficacy of the Holy Spirit in changing the way people lived their daily lives was a primary characteristic of the Wesleyan movement. As Bishop Stokes points out in his study of the movement, Wesley felt that "A religion that is not experienced is dead and fruitless. God is concerned with inner

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transformation which leads directly to deeds of love and mercy."

In carrying out his mission of proclaiming the efficacy of "experienced religion", Wesley reluctantly broke with the Church of England and founded Methodism based upon his firm conviction of the need for a religion not only professed and believed but experienced. He took issue with Anglicanism over the means by which grace is mediated to the soul of the believer. The Church of England believed that grace was conveyed primarily through the administering of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist; whereas Wesley, though he did not disregard the efficacy of the sacraments, believed that grace was mediated primarily through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In England the Wesleyans, along with other groups, were labeled with the pejorative epithet "enthusiasts" and were satirized in such novels as Smollet's Humphrey Clinker. In addition they were classified as another congregation of Dissenters and thereby were denied access to education at Oxford or Cambridge. Wesley made a journey to America to lend support to co-workers who were "evangelizing" the colonies. There the work of the Methodists was a strong impetus behind a widespread movement called The Great Awakening which initiated a strong tradition of evangelistic preaching in America.

The seed of what is called "evangelical preaching" in the broad sense of the term was planted with Wesley's "heart warming experience" at Aldersgate, which led him to proclaim the gospel in a particular way and with a particular emphasis. Its first fruits were nourished on English soil. When the seed was planted in the soil of America, it seems to have grown even more luxuriantly than in England, and to have branched out into more permutations, as it adapted to new soils and climates. What I am calling Invitational Preaching is one of those adaptations of evangelical preaching.

However, whether in England or America, evangelical preaching differed significantly from other ways of disseminating the Gospel. In liturgical or high church services the emphasis is primarily on liturgy, chanting, prayers read from a prayer book, and a certain type of music for putting communicants in a mood to receive the benefits of the Gospel. For the sake of contrast compare the difference between a

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Bach or Mozart mass sung by a trained choir and a typical evangelical hymn sung by the congregation. Further, compare the spontaneous prayer of an American farmer, who is called on, unexpectedly perhaps, by the preacher to offer a prayer, with a prayer read from The Book of Common Prayer. You begin to get the picture. The evangelical service places greater emphasis on spontaneity and emotional involvement in the service than does the liturgical service.

At the time Wesley broke from the Church of England, a state church, one who was born into the church, baptized as an infant, confirmed at the age of twelve, and thereafter regally participated in the sacrament of the Eucharist, was thereby a Christian. In evangelical churches on the other hand the emphasis was on winning converts. One became a Christian by being "converted", which was a heart warming experience. The success of the evangelical preacher was measured by the number of converts he/she gained through preaching; and the sermon was the high point of the evangelical service.

So, as you see, among evangelicals--still speaking in a broad sense--the Gospel is spread through preaching, therefore the preacher is of paramount importance. And the Gospel is preached in order to win converts or invite persons to make other significant decisions. Ideally the preacher preaches with passionate intensity, because he or she has been called by God, and consequently feels as compelled to preach as St. Paul, who cried "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel." (I Corinthians 9:16) Ideally he or she is anointed by the grace of God with the power of the Holy Spirit, as was Peter after Pentecost when he preached to a huge crowd and gained five thousand converts.

To a large extent, then, those preachers who are generally thought of as evangelical share these ideals in common. Likewise qualities of their preaching--those qualities designated by the descriptive terms grace-filled preaching, anointed preaching, charismatic preaching, invitational preaching--are shared to a certain extent.

First let us take evangelical preaching in a stricter sense than I have used it above in presenting the historical development of the evangelical movement generally in relation to other religious traditions. The main thrust of the evangelical preaching is to win converts as stated earlier. To be sure it is a great joy to all
preachers when someone is persuaded by his or her sermon to become a Christian. Dr. Charles Brown, the former Dean of Yale Divinity School, wrote that following a response to the invitation when he preached his first sermon. "I cried all the way home for very joy that God had called me to be a minister of Jesus Christ." But when success and failure are measured by the number of converts, the preacher is tempted to use unduly manipulative techniques to persuade some to make a decision, or to regard a sermon as a failure if no one responds to it by converting. The dedicated invitational preacher, by contrast, will always bear in mind a point made by Alan Walker: "Conversions are God's business. All we can do is to be faithful and offer Christ. The Holy Spirit must work the miracle. We are only the source of the seed. Our task is to preach for a verdict, leaving the response and victory to Christ Himself." 

Charismatic preaching is a term of fairly recent origin. Among the general populace the word charismatic is used to describe an extroverted personality that possesses a special charm, a natural knack for engaging others and holding their attention. In the United States in recent years, certain televangelists used their natural charisma for the ulterior motive of making money, and that temptation is not confined to televangelists among the clergy. Genuine charisma, however, is a spiritual quality that is infused in the preacher by the Holy Spirit; it is sometimes called the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Many famous preachers who possessed charisma regarded it as a gift, a special grace of God. But they prepared for the reception of that gift by prayer and meditation. Followers of John Wesley attributed his success in the midst of difficult circumstances to that prayer chair in his house on City Road in London. In that chair, he would read the Bible and pray daily at five o'clock in the morning. Circuit-riding Methodist preachers in America would go out behind the church when they arrived at their destination to pray for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. E. Stanley Jones, with whom I had the privilege of traveling overseas, religiously observed the practice of spending time alone prior to preaching a sermon, which on occasion was three times a day.

He called this time "the quiet hour", a time for listening to what the Spirit had to say to him.

Authentic charismatic preaching, anointed preaching, and invitational preaching, are somewhat synonymous in so far as to trust to the Holy Spirit to ignite their souls so that their message is vivified. Let me quote Charles Reynolds Brown again. He said that "all the homiletical techniques are like dust on the ground unless the Holy Spirit breathe life into the sermon." The special quality of Invitational Preaching is its focus on the invitation, and its reliance on the Holy Spirit to lead the listener to respond to the invitation.

As I write about this issue of extending invitation, I am fully aware that many persons ask, "What percentage of those who come forward continue in the faith?" I am aware of the abundant statistics that show that only a small percentage of those who have responded to evangelistic crusades actually belong to churches and are active in local churches. This is a difficult problem indeed and we have found no simple solution to the matter of a "following up" system as a sequel to the invitation system.

But I am not really talking about people coming forward in revivals. Rather I am talking about a content and preaching style that opens up the invitation to all the people including those who attend regular Sunday morning services.

Furthermore, I'm making the basic assumption that C. G. Jung is correct when he says "That people over 35 all have problems that ultimately reveal the need for a religious outlook in life." He adds that "none were healed unless they regained their religious outlook."

Today I'm persuaded that many persons sit on the pews on Sunday morning with all kinds of personal needs (spiritual, emotional, psychological) whether they recognize them openly or not.

What is it that is missing? No one simple answer could be given. However, basically most of them need to find meaning in life beyond their secular activities which do not satisfy their inner life.

If this is so, the pulpit has an unusual opportunity to address their needs and invite them to find meaning in Jesus Christ when He is accepted as Savior and Lord.

\[^3\text{Ibid. p. 25.}\]
One may raise the question, What is Invitational Preaching? How do we define it?

It seems to me that not one single definition would be adequate to describe the scope of this type of preaching.

Let me outline at least some of the most essential ingredients of Invitational Preaching:

- It is based on a theology of acceptance; therefore it is non-judgmental and opens the door to whosoever will...
- It is the kind of preaching that addresses the whole person.
- It is preaching that acknowledges the human condition of sinfulness including even on the part of the one who preaches.
- It is preaching that is highly aware and sensitive to human needs and sees people with new eyes not as they are but as they may become.
- It is preaching that deals with real people in the real world of the 21st century.
- It is profoundly Biblical in content and basic theological assumptions.
- It is Christ-centered preaching acknowledging Christ as both Savior and Lord of the individual as well as of the collective realms.
- It is preaching that holds persons to repentance and faith as a responsible decision but the call is not issued in an overpowering way.
- It is preaching that calls for a decision related to the subject that was preached.
- It is preaching that understands all the emotional baggage that people carry with them constantly.
- It is preaching that leads a person to a total commitment, to discipleship, and to the community of faith.

Sometimes we have referred to what I'm calling Invitational Preaching as evangelistic preaching which is one of the most effective ways of communicating the good news of the Gospel and securing a response.

There is a sense in which all preaching is evangelistic or evangelical in the best sense of the word. Every time one preaches, one is proclaiming the Gospel and therefore proclaiming "good news"
regardless of the subject at hand and anticipating some kind of response as people hear the good news.

In my using the term invitation or invitational preaching I am trying to convey the same basic idea of traditional understanding of evangelistic preaching but at the same time attempting to get away from some of the unfortunate stereotypes with which the word evangelistic preaching is associated.

Another way to define Invitational Preaching is to say that it is basically the redemptive proclamation of the Gospel. This proclamation is done in the context of the reality of the human predicament. I am aware that the human predicament can never be ignored by the proclamation. Therefore, I believe that the answer to the human predicament must be "experienced" existentially. It must be appropriated, internalized and lived. This makes it essential to have a beginning point in one's journey as well as a climate of acceptance and reconciliation and to hear the everlasting message of the Gospel that says, "You are accepted in spite of being unacceptable." (Tillich)

The Gospel is invitation. The word "come" is perhaps the most significant term found throughout the New Testament. We find it in the story of the Samaritan woman and how she went all over town and invited the people of the town to come and hear Christ, too. (John 4:28-30) The first word issued by the woman evangelist was "Come" and one of the last words of the New Testament found in Revelations is when the spirit says, "Come." (Revelations 22:17)

Invitational Preaching must take seriously a theology of acceptance for "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) All persons and especially strangers must be made to feel that they are accepted "as they are". The message needs to be proclaimed in such a way that the listener may respond to the all-important question, "How do I receive God's grace?"

Invitational Preaching begins where people are. It acknowledges the reality of sinfulness. It recognizes the flaws and failures of persons in our complex society. It conveys compassion for those who are hurt, for those who are disenfranchised, for those who live in constant ambiguity, for those who refuse to live in the real world of
the twenty-first century.  

But I'm not talking about calling persons just for conversion. This is indeed a basic evangelistic concern that we all have. But rather I'm talking about an all-inclusive concept of responding to the Gospel by all sorts of conditions of men and women. The invitation sermon is designed to deal with all kinds of human needs, addressing those needs and inviting persons to respond to something that is challenging, which always includes the element of risk but always fulfilling.

Wesley's preaching stressed the theme of repentance and forgiveness. He addressed these themes in most of his sermons and was aware of the despair and guilt in which people found themselves and offered them the grace of God's acceptance. His major theme was always justification by faith which leads to "holiness of heart and life". It may be that in this post-modern era, the time has come to quit inviting people to come to church and instead invite people to come to Christ.  

The question comes up about the issue of God's grace and human free will in the context of the invitational sermon. Obviously this is one of the central tenets of Christian theology. God's prevenient grace is already present in the heart of the listener. It is a grace that goes before us and yet preserves one's free will.

Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am.....yet not I but the grace of God that is with me." (I Corinthians 15:10) So, one must maintain the delicate balance between God's sovereignty and free will.

It has been repeatedly said that we need a new language of faith and new ways of communicating the gospel to a shockingly different world. There is no question about the fact that the new generation needs to understand clearly what is it that we are talking about. Undoubtedly there is power in words but expressed in the context of a given cultural and existential situation. Sometimes, it may take some type of de-programming first and then re-programming anew in order to communicate effectively today.

I am firmly aware that certain words in the vocabulary carry undue baggage that becomes a real barrier to communicating that expected word

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10 See George Hunter’s How to Reach Secular People.

11 See Leonard Sweet’s Faithquakes, p. 28.
from the pulpit. Such is the case with the terms "evangelistic preaching", "altar calls", and "calls to decision". This seems to echo experiences good and bad of days gone by.

However, the need is still there!

The question arises as to whether or not we can find a new approach and perhaps a new language in order to fill that need whenever it is present in every congregation every single Sunday.

I believe that it is possible to discover the age-old wisdom of preaching in such a way as to address people's needs and elicit their response.

In this lecture, I hope to suggest some directions which I trust will be helpful regarding the subject of Invitational Preaching. This is not designed to be a lecture on Homiletics, per se, but rather, it is intended to identify a specialized approach to preaching.

There are, to be sure, several other ways to identify the kind of preaching that I am talking about. It could be called redemptive preaching. There is a sense in which all preaching is redemptive or ought to be. It could be called evangelistic preaching. This phrase has been closely identified with revivals and preaching missions. I have in mind a more inclusive scope than just special services and meetings.

This type of preaching could likewise be identified as preaching for a response. I'm using that phrase as a subtitle for the lecture. It seems to come closer to what I have in mind. This latter terminology refers to preaching that anticipates and expects some kind of response.

What I mean by Invitational Preaching is the kind of proclamation of the Gospel that not only addresses human needs and persons where they really are but provides a climate of invitation both in content and style in delivery.

When I write about the sermon of invitation I am not pleading for a return to the fiery styles of certain evangelists of another era but rather I am optimistic about the possibility of a rediscovery of the sense of urgency which is an inherent part of the Gospel. If the message is meaningful to the preacher, if it addresses his or her own needs, then the element of emotion emerges naturally. We need to be honest as to how God has touched our own lives. Dr. Craddock refers to
this issue and uses the phrase "re-experiencing the message". During the delivery of the sermon, he refers to some sermons as lacking "passion" as if nothing were at stake. He writes, "People cannot live by ideas alone: the whole theme has to register the value of those ideas. We call this passion." It has been said that the unpardonable sin for preachers is to be "boring". The preaching of the gospel must enable persons to "get up and walk" and begin to live. This is indeed exciting!

The importance of spiritual preparation on the part of the preacher is paramount and cannot be underestimated. Nor should the importance of academic preparation be underestimated or taken for granted. In the early history of the evangelistic movement, it was not uncommon for an individual who had felt the call to preach to begin his proclaiming the Gospel with little or no academic preparation. We need not cast aspersions on the genuineness of their religious experiences or of the effectiveness of their preaching. However, in contemporary society, sometimes called the Information Age, seminary training not merely in homiletics but also in biblical studies, counseling, theology and history of the church is more urgently called for than ever. (It might be pointed out that Methodism has from the beginning provided for training its clergy.) Donald Messer underscores the importance of academics when he says that "a vital and vibrant seminary needs the historic and contemporary ethical and religious vision and vitality of the church. The seminary stands as a bridge between the church and academia, inviting both to journey across in the quest for truth."!

However, in the final analysis we know that the effectiveness of a sermon is not going to be measured in terms of the subtlety of the thought or ideas communicated, nor in the rhetorical techniques of the rendition, nor in the grammatical perfection or literary beauty of the style, prized though these may be. At stake is a spiritual connection between the preacher and the congregation, for which all his/her academic training and spiritual life have hopefully prepared him/her.

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2. Ibid. p. 220.
3. Donald E. Messer. *Calling the Church and the Seminary into the Twenty-First Century.* p. 25.
The bottom line will be the extent to which listeners come alive as a result of the sermon. To what extent do they begin to experience abundant life? To what extent are they touched by the power of the Holy Spirit? To what extent are they motivated to respond positively in the direction of a changed and transformed life? To what extent do they become doers of the Word as well as hearers of the Word?

Successful invitational preaching is a complex matter, a whole constellation of subtle factors enters into it. Although this is not a lecture on Homiletics per se as stated earlier, I would like to pay some attention to the demeanor of the preacher and the content and delivery of the sermon from the moment the minister steps into the pulpit and faces his/her congregation.

Invitational Preaching is conveyed through the person of the preacher. In addition to the content of the message and the way it is delivered, we cannot disregard the supreme importance of the demeanor of the person who does the preaching. If in the last hour before facing the congregation one has felt the "anointing of the Holy Spirit", then a joyous radiance will emanate from his or her countenance. This does not mean that the preacher is unacquainted with grief, has never suffered failure, never been wounded or broken hearted. Quite the contrary it means that he or she has for the time being transcended personal pains, aggravating frustrations and feelings of inadequacy. I am not talking about an artificial, plastic smile which seems to be superimposed on the face like a mask. Nor am I talking about an extroverted personality. God can very well use an introverted as well as an extroverted person. I am talking about something deeper than that, about an inner radiance which is a gift of the Spirit. This is something we cannot manufacture; we can only be an open channel for that grace to flow through us.

Heightened expectation will accompany the charisma of the preacher's countenance if he or she approaches the pulpit expecting something to happen. As Dr. Craddock says, "The preacher needs to create a dynamic anticipation and therefore create expectation on the part of the listener and engage the listener into the message that is being heard." The preacher ascends the "throne" believing that

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someone out there in the congregation is eager to hear the sermon and will respond to it. The preacher assumes the place before that sacred desk expecting and trusting that "the words that go out of my mouth shall not return unto me empty." (Isaiah 55:11) High expectations on the part of the preacher are infectious; they infect the listeners. In this frame of mind, the preacher is able, to quote Dr. Craddock again, "to utilize creative ways to hold the listener's attention in order that the hearer may respond with attitudinal and behavioral change." An old adage says, "Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God." With this kind of approach the preacher will speak with zeal and conviction, even a sense of authority, that will establish a rapport with the congregation.

However, a preacher should be careful not to allow zeal or passionate convictions to come across in a tone that sounds dogmatic or domineering, as if he or she were trying to impose those convictions on the listeners. For basic communication theory teaches us, if we haven't learned it from our own experience, that trying to impose ideas on another person elicits resistance, if not outright resentment and rejection.

Indeed there is much more to communication than the words or ideas themselves. A specialist in communication theory, Albert Mehrabian, presented some rather striking statistics in Psychology Today. "Only seven percent of communication," he says, "is verbal, thirty-eight percent is conveyed by tone of voice, and fifty-five percent through body language." These statistics challenge the preacher to work as hard on the delivery of a sermon as on the content. The invitational sermon contains the "kerygma", the good news, so it must convey the joy and excitement befitting good news. In so far as the good news of redemption is intended for those who are weary and heavy laden, it needs to be delivered in a sincerely caring and compassionate tone in order to be redemptive to those in need. When in the course of a sermon the volume of the voice gets louder and louder and the tone becomes more and more urgent to the point of sounding harsh, attention


17 Albert Mehrabian. Communication Without Words. p. 53.
will more than likely shift from the message to the preacher of the message. A tone befitting the invitation of the Gospel is a comely, winsome tone, a tone that does not exceed the bounds of decorum.

Perhaps the greatest change in invitational sermons for contemporary society, when compared with those preached in previous generations, occurs in the content of the sermon. To get at this difference, let me describe a typical revival sermon during the decades before the Second World War, though such sermons are not confined to revival meetings nor to that era. The service begins with hymns such as "In the Sweet By and By", "Shall We Gather at the River", and "I Am Bound for the Promised Land", which have an obvious emotional appeal for oppressed souls seeking solace. In contrast to the sweetness of the hymns, the preacher preaches a sermon on hell fire and damnation, using as a text the parable of the sheep and the goats or of Dives and Lazarus. In the course of the sermon he—for in that era we would not have said "he or she"—pulls out all the stops in describing in concrete detail the tortures of the damned: the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, the worm that never dies, the lake of unquenchable fire, the stench of sulphur and brimstone. He dwells at length on the endlessness of eternity. He seems to have a morbid fascination with lurid sins of fornication and with the perilous danger of gambling and drinking, lying and blaspheming. He touches on how much God hates sin, and how one may die before tomorrow. I need not go on; perhaps you are familiar with notable examples from literature such as Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", or the priest's sermon in Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist*.

The point is that the sole purpose of such sermons, often reinforced by flamboyance of delivery, is to bring lost souls to an emotional crisis by rousing feelings of guilt, fear and unworthiness. They gloss over the fact that God is no respecter of persons, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

But, today, preachers with a deep experience of the Holy Spirit and of their own fallibility and shortcomings, will therefore shift the emphasis as their presentation from God's wrath to God's mercy and grace, from judgment by God to acceptance by God, from the imprisonment of damnation to the liberating power of redemption.

Invitational Preaching must take seriously a theology of
acceptance as stated earlier. All persons, and especially the strayed, the estranged and the alienated, must be made to feel that they are accepted "as they are". One of the things that children fear most is the anger of their parents, and a fear of having lost their love when they are punished. There is a story of a man who attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting after having been constantly criticized and disparaged for his addiction to drinking. While there he was told about the twelve-step program and also heard the testimony of people who were overcoming their addiction to alcohol. After the meeting he was asked, "What impressed you most about the meeting?" Without hesitation he responded, "The word 'acceptance'. I kept hearing that word over and over again. and for the first time in my life I understood what it meant to be accepted."

That is precisely the message of an invitational sermon informed by a theology of acceptance. Let me hasten to add that a theology of acceptance is not grounded in soothing platitudes, and ministers should not fall into the habit using such platitudes as "I'm Okay, You're Okay." Christianity recognizes, as a fundamental doctrine, that what we call "original sin" is a stark reality of the human condition, that we are not in and of ourselves "okay." The dejected alcoholic is keenly aware that he/she is not living abundantly. Instead of hearing judgments on his/her condition and descriptions of the pains of alienation from God, he/she longs to hear of a remedy for his/her condition. Therefore, the invitational sermon proclaims that all persons are accepted by God, not because of what they are, not because of what they can do in and of themselves to merit God's favor or disfavor, but in spite of what they are or may do. It is the work of grace! (Ephesians 2:8)

It should therefore be clear that the redemptive notes of God's love, His acceptance, and His grace, should be sounded as variations on the theme of every invitational sermon. The implications of the parable of the prodigal son or the lost sheep, regardless of the particular text, should dominate the sermon. To be relevant to contemporary society, the sermon should focus primarily on the availability of God's power to rectify lives as they are lived in the present. As Joe Harding puts it: "Christ is ever present to heal, to forgive, to teach, to challenge, to offer salvation and new life to
hurting people."\textsuperscript{18} Fears and hopes of what may happen in a future life should be relegated to a lesser position in our preaching.

By definition, the thrust of an invitational sermon is to elicit a decision, a verdict, in response to an invitation, and the climax of the service is the extending of the invitation. But how does one extend the invitation meaningfully and effectively? What if there is no response? Does one extend the invitation if only church members of long standing are listening to the sermon? In revival meetings and preaching missions the invitation to come forward is expected at the conclusion of the service. But should an invitation be part of a high liturgical service on Sunday morning?

Such questions have instilled an indecisiveness among many preachers nowadays in regard to extending an invitation. This indecisiveness stems from a feeling of awkwardness at times, or from a sense that the invitation has become a stultified routine, or an uncomfortable intimation that no one will respond. Consequently the policy of many of our denominational churches is to delete the invitation as a regular part of the service. O. D. Martin responded to this by saying that "At least one correctable flaw is a general unwillingness to extend meaningful evangelistic invitations."\textsuperscript{19}

I would concur with Martin's judgement, with qualifications that I am sure he would accept, i.e. that an invitation may be explicit or implicit, that there are various kinds of invitation, and the invitation can be extended in various ways. The practice of prolonging the service by singing "Just As I Am" over and over and stopping after every stanza to exhort the brethren and sisters to "come forward and accept the Lord." is not the only way to handle the invitation.

The outstanding writer and preacher, Leonard Sweet, has wisely written, "The challenge for the post-modern church is this: how do you preach grace to a society that is under the illusion that they deserve everything they can get and have gotten?"\textsuperscript{20} This is indeed the challenge of Invitational Preaching to the boomers, busters, Generation X, etc.

\textsuperscript{18} Joe Harding. \textit{Have I Told You Lately}. p. 15.

\textsuperscript{19} O. D. Martin. \textit{Invite: Preaching for a Response}. p. VIII.

\textsuperscript{20} Leonard Sweet. \textit{Faithquakes}. p. 117.
The subject of Invitational Preaching is basically a communication issue in which a more indirect approach can be far more effective in our time.  

Part of the key to Invitational Preaching is to be mindful and sensitive to the silent dialogue that takes place while the sermon is being delivered. Persons are responding to what is being said throughout the proclamation. It is a matter of sensing the emotions of the people, watching their gestures, imagining their situations, and experiencing true and genuine empathy. This is why intimacy between preacher and congregation is far more easily achieved by a pastor than by a visiting speaker. It is a desirable mutuality that is experienced. Paul S. Minear identified some of the major ingredients which are essential: "The chosen words and symbols, intonation, and accompanying gestures, the burden of the silences, the non-sequiturs of thought, and the alertness of the listeners."  

Martin Buber has been indeed helpful at the point of helping us recognize the deeper level of communication that takes place when we open the door to that other person(s) and make them feel invited. It is an I-Thou encounter between the person who occupies the pulpit and the listener in the pew. Out of this encounter, there is a coalescence, a totally new situation emerges.

The preacher is not to make decisions on behalf of individual persons. He/she is to tell the story and let the hearer determine in what specific ways the story applies to his/her life. A direct approach in the decision making process could be counter-productive. It is better to respect human dignity and to simply present the alternative. Sometimes the story itself will do without any further word. Other times, while persons do not make decisions while they are there, they go home and reflect deeply on what was said. Divine serendipity occurs later and then it is that grace happens!

The doctrine of prevenient grace is a basic theological tenet in Invitational Preaching. Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace was that the grace of God is present in the life of every person regardless

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21 See Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*.

22 Paul S. Minear, "Communication and Community", *New Theology* #9, p. 256.
of whether the person is living in rebellion or in trust. Wesley believed in God's sovereign grace but also in personal free will. It may be sometimes perverted but it is never cancelled. The grace of God surrounds and anticipates us in every situation. Fulfillment is found in God's prevenient grace.

What all this means in terms of invitational preaching is that there is "the antecedent activity of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the hearer. We never speak to persons who are actually ignorant of God or totally bereft of his grace. The Spirit is always there before us and this means that our job is less of imparting truth that otherwise remains unknown, but rather of stirring up the human spirit of awakening--inviting and persuading men (persons) to attend through the Word within."\textsuperscript{13} And then Outler adds, "The Gospel is an invitation of the Holy Spirit to fellowship in God's beloved community."\textsuperscript{14}

Invitational preaching is truly evangelical not in the sense of a theological position necessarily but rather in the sense that the Christian evangel is proclaimed in gracious invitation to change and new life.

Prevenient grace is followed by convincing grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is indeed at work in the invitational sermon\textsuperscript{15}

Theologically speaking one cannot deny the inevitable tension between God's action and human response. It is obvious that no one can save himself or herself. Only God saves through His marvelous grace but the human response is essential, the "striving" is necessary as Jesus refers to it in Luke 13:24: "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able."

The word "strive" in the Greek is also "agonize" (agonizesthe). God's act of salvation comes from above--it is God's invitation but the human response involves striving, agonizing, making an effort to respond to God's gracious invitation.

\textsuperscript{13} Albert Outler. \textit{Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit.} pp. 45-46.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 47.

\textsuperscript{15} For a more extensive discussion on prevenient grace, please refer to Stephen Gunter's excellent paper entitled "Thinking Theologically about Evangelism". Additional references are included therein.
The invitational sermon is based upon this delicate balance between God’s sovereignty and human freedom. It is based on two aspects of our salvation: God’s action in Jesus Christ and our human response.

Any resource dealing with the subject of preaching has to face two great realities: one is the theological context out of which the proclamation takes place and the other one is the cultural milieu in which the proclamation is done.

There is a recent publication entitled *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Post-Modern World* which provides some rather helpful insights concerning the dual task of the preacher.²⁶

Invitational Preaching is preaching for a response as stated earlier. It is preaching that reflects both in content and style of delivery a passion, a certain intensity, a sense of urgency, a zeal, and excitement which is an integral part of the good news.

The basic concern is, how can this be done with utmost respect for human dignity? How is it to be done without coercion and certainly without any kind of manipulation? How can this be done with grace and compassion and address all other human needs in addition to the need of conversion? Then, how do we move beyond meeting people’s needs and ask them to become concerned about meeting the needs of the world such as eradicating cruel racism or promoting the extremely urgent environmental concerns?

Karin Granberg-Michaelson in her book *Healing Community* poses some questions for every preacher and lay leader in a given community:
- Are we in our church’s healing community?
- Are we really energized with the words that come from the pulpit?
- Are people radically changed from sickness into health?
- Are we willing to be identified with the plight of the oppressed and relate the healing power of God to these circumstances?
- Are we ready to join the Lord in his self-given struggle with evil, even to the cross, in order that healing, reconciliation, and wholeness may become manifest in the world?²⁷


Tillich affirmed, "There is one Savior in whom we find the saving grace without limit. A Savior that has power over all the demonic powers. A Savior who can reach into the depth of our soul in spite of us and bring healing and a new reality in man/woman and his/her world."\(^{28}\)

Albert Outler interpreting Wesley is also indeed helpful, when he writes, "Evangelism for the Wesleys was more than conversion and regeneration. It was both an invitation and motivation to live the Christian life in Christian fellowship and an implicit indirect social revolution."\(^{29}\)

Care should be taken that the appeal not be made as a simplistic approach promising that all the problems of the world will be solved overnight. There needs to be total honesty in the appeal and an awareness of the claims of discipleship. There needs to be a recognition that this is only the first step towards a lifelong process of spiritual growth. There needs to be an awareness that not all the problems will be automatically solved but that they will be approached with a new perspective, a new spirit and a new outlook on life.

We need to guard against the danger that coming to the altar does not require anything else to be done. There may be persons who have come forward but have fallen out because of temptation or discouragement, or because they did not receive the totality of what they expected.

We need to guard against the possibility that the person may be undergoing some kind of emotional experience entirely which will not be lasting.

We need to be aware that many persons have come forward and have fallen by the wayside.

This can indeed happen if there is not an intentional ongoing nurture and growth. Undoubtedly many persons become disenchanted with institutional religion or some of the proceedings in the church. They indeed expect perfection following their experience and usually do not find it.

The important thing in conversion is that a definite change takes


place in their behavior and way of living their daily lives.

The question is how are we going to rediscover the whole concept of invitation in the twenty-first century. We have read much about the importance of being a "seeker", "sensitive", or "seeker friendly" church. The Willow Creek Community Church originated the concept of a "seeker service" and a "believer service".

David S. Luecke, writing in the Christian century, affirms that "Personalizing the person to be reached is a helpful starting point and a valuable corrective to doctrinaire approaches to outreach and worship. Effective church leaders of previous generations usually had a good intuitive feel for the people they wanted to reach. Today's marketing emphasis relies on more explicit ways of identifying what innovative pastors used to assess intuitively."

One of the most renowned minds in the field of homiletics and a great preacher in his own right is Professor Fred Craddock, who was quoted earlier in this lecture. He says, "If nobody else is listening except the preacher himself or herself, the sermon ought to be good enough to make him/her a better person." If this is true, and I believe it is, think of what a preacher would be after preaching for over thirty or forty years.

I have always felt that the sermon must definitely speak to one's condition. In a sense all sermons are autobiographical. If the sermon does not say anything to the preacher--don't preach it! The preacher himself or herself needs to be touched and moved as a result of it.

It seems that many preachers avoid any kind of emotion in their preaching simply because of their reaction against days gone by when emotion was frequently exaggerated. Dr. Craddock himself has written that "there is a passion appropriate to the significance and urgency of the Gospel and there's no valid reason to conceal that passion." Invitational Preaching must include the element of passion for there is much at stake--it is a matter of life or death! This is the inevitable sense of urgency that must come through the preacher's voice.

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I'm not talking about any kind of excessive emotional delivery. I'm not talking about getting louder and louder in order to compensate for lack of preparation. I'm not talking about being less academic or anti-intellectual but I'm talking about putting a little "salsa" (picante sauce) into the sermon.

The invitation needs to be extended in the context of what has been proclaimed. The lectionary, whenever it is properly followed, provides in a period of every three years all kinds of motivation and inspiration for all kinds of circumstances and all kinds of conditions of men and women.

For instance, the response could be a hymn of invitation, then a baptism, a confirmation, a profession or reaffirmation of faith and/or reception into membership.32

The important thing is to find out that the sequence of proclamation and response must always be included. In other words, there can be no true proclamation without some type of response, and there is no response unless there is a proclamation (kerygma). Some signs of response could take the form of an affirmation of faith by selecting one of the several creeds.

Or at times, there may be an invitation to some specific action having to do with a problem or a need, either in the community of faith or in the secular community.

The important point is to state categorically that the service has not ended and is not complete unless there is that definite call to discipleship with all the multiple implications of that call in terms of the totality of life as it is lived in the world.

Sometimes, the most effective approach to the matter of extending the invitation is simply to include the prayer of silence immediately following the sermon. It is an opportunity for persons to reflect about their own lives in the context of what they've just heard. There may be soft background music played and the pastor may simply say, "The altar is now open for those wishing to come forward and pray as you respond to the message today" or "As you remain in your pew, may I invite you to focus upon specific ways in which the message today may

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32See the Worship Resources of the United Methodist Church Hymnal Introduction to the General Services, Psalter, and Other Acts of Worship. Hoyt L. Hickman, Editor, p. 41.
apply to your own personal life."

The reason that the normal Call to Discipleship becomes boring is because it becomes routine and the words are repetitious.

One of the most serious concerns related to invitational preaching is the one that stresses the idea of "Come to Jesus" and everything is going to be all right. It is a fragmented gospel to say the least for it conveys the idea that nothing has to be changed. The person is not required to give up anything or alter anything. The note of obedience is totally silent and the demands of discipleship totally absent. One must realize that there needs to be another appeal as well which would include invitation to accept Christ "as Lord".

Of course there are many significant implications of that kind of total and inclusive commitment.

For instance the lordship of Christ over one's life would mean a total commitment to:

- To be involved in the pursuit of environmental concerns.
- To be concerned and work against all kinds of dehumanizing conditions everywhere and especially those experienced by immigrants.
- To care about the oppressed and fight all kinds of oppressions.
- To be sensitive about the plight of women who are disenfranchised.
- To empathize with the untold struggle of ethnic minority persons.
- To be politically involved at all levels of our civic responsibility.
- To feed the hungry and to house the homeless.
- To employ persons formerly on the welfare rolls.
- And so forth and so on....

It would be a long list of implications of what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the twenty-first century. It has to do with asking the question, "What does it mean for Jesus to be Lord in the context of the burning issues of our time?"

I realize that this latter appeal is not popular. It is so much easier to deal with just the personal aspect of the decision to accept Christ as "my personal Savior". To crown him as Lord of one's life and of our social structures requires a total and serious commitment.

In conclusion let me summarize and say that the concept that a sermon has to be invitational and therefore call for a response is
inextricably bound to the very nature of the Gospel itself as invitation. In this context, the sermon must elicit some kind of response to the proclamation.

All preachers, whether they preach in stately Gothic cathedrals or humble places of worship, are called to preach a message of salvation and hope.

All of us long for the joy of preaching sermons that would ignite the hearts and minds of our people. We pray earnestly for the anointing of the Holy Spirit so that we may engage in "anointed preaching". As Lloyd Ogilvie said, "The indwelling spirit in us is fire, and this fire," he adds, "purifies our motives, sets us aflame with concern for people, illuminates our life with radiance." New life comes to the pulpit when we are possessed by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us "tongues of fire", so that "grace is mediated through us" and our preaching becomes a "means of grace". When the radiance of the pulpit thus becomes a magnetic force that attracts the listener to respond, then you have true invitational preaching.

In order for the proclamation to be effective, the terminology in which the proclamation takes place must be in keeping with the vocabulary in which persons communicate today as repeatedly stated earlier. This is not any kind of reductionism but rather a reinterpretation of the message in order to reach the outsider and enable him/her to respond.

The traditional Biblical terminology may have no meaning whatsoever to the post-modern mind. Therefore the concepts and ideas need to be expressed clearly in the context of where people really are.

A contemporary rendering of the meaning of God’s grace in the vernacular reads: "There is nothing you can do to make God love you less and there is nothing you can do to make God love you more."

Whatever else may be said about evangelism and the multiple innovative strategies that abound everywhere, I’m of the firm conviction that the pulpit can be the most powerful vehicle of evangelism in the 21st century. Let the trumpet sound and let that clear echo resound again all over the world for "He cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.'" (John 7:37-38)
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