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Listening to the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) Sermon Listener

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of an ethnographic study on preaching within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community.[1] The study explored the preaching event from the experience of the listener. The US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener represents a unique group of individuals that have a particular experience of preaching, which can provide insights on how preaching constitutes a vehicle for shaping and re-shaping a religious and social community. Through the use of in-depth interviews of a diverse group of US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listeners a series of characteristics of a good sermon were identified.

Key Words: preaching, US Hispanic/Latino (Latina), co-creation of meaning, transformation, ethnicity, Bible

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Introduction

Preaching remains a pervasive communication event among the world religious groups. As Clifton Guthrie argues, "It (preaching) rivals the classroom lecture and the live singing performance as the most enduring form of live public oral communication in a world otherwise awash in print and electronic media."[2] However, preaching, particularly in the Christian community, is not a communication event that involves an active speaker and a passive audience.[3] Unlike other forms of communication, Christian preaching occurs within a specific community of individuals that is actively involved in the process of hearing the sermon, and making moral, ethical, emotional, and religious choices based on the preacher's words. Through preaching, a gathered group of people is formed into a community of faith.

Despite the pervasive nature of the sermon, the study of preaching as a communication event is limited. Homiletical theory and preaching are interdisciplinary efforts that bring together fields as diverse as Biblical Studies, Hermeneutics, Theology, and Communication; and its impact extends into the lives of individuals and communities. However, because of the transcendental nature of preaching, the impact of the sermon as a communication vehicle for the formation of personal and communal identity has been marginally explored. As Guthrie contends, "Homiletics as a field remains curiously detached from related fields such as persuasion studies in psychology, the psychology of religious experience, new sociology research on conversion and group adherence, or theories of ritual behavior in cognitive science…"[4] This circumstance has begun to change as homileticians and scholars from other disciplines have begun to interact and observe the preaching event as a communication event. This work has begun to focus on the preaching event as a means to understand communication patterns within a specific social milieu; and in ways to increase the effectiveness of the individual preacher on any given religious setting.[5]

While several studies have begun to provide insights into different areas of preaching, the amount of research focusing on the listeners' perspective is limited. This limited amount of research becomes negligible when the focus is racial/ethnic minority sermon listeners. Thus, the purpose of this study is to add to this burgeoning area of study, by exploring the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) experience of the sermon as a communication event through the identification of the characteristics of a "good" sermon as perceived by the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener. By focusing on the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener, this study seeks to start a conversation on understanding the preaching event as a phenomenon in which meaning is co-created, thus informing the practice of preaching within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community and the Church at large. By

seeking such a goal, this research project can become a building block in the process of understanding the religious communication patterns within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community and other Christian communities. Finally, this study is not meant to be exhaustive, but an attempt to begin a conversation about the impact of the sermon within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) Christian community. Specifically, this study seeks to answer this research question: What type of sermon characteristics does the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) listener identify as making a good sermon?

The Sermon as Symbolic Interaction

Homiletics has been consistently defined as the art of preparing and preaching sermons.[6] It is fitting that homiletics is called an "art," because it is a multi-disciplinary effort that crosses a spectrum of theological disciplines and communication theories.[7] This multi-disciplinary effort is distilled into a product that is a synthesis of two complex processes: the preparation of the sermon and the delivery of the sermon. The preparation of the sermon is a theological task that involves the intersection of dogmatics, Biblical exegesis and practical theology. As Karl Barth argued "…we cannot think of any one of these disciplines without the other two, nor can we speak of any of them in isolation without speaking of the others as well."[8] Having completed the preparation of the sermon, the preacher engages rhetorical and other communication theories in order to communicate the sermon to the audience. Therefore, homiletical theory concerns itself with the choices that the preacher makes on the use of the Bible, theology, and communication when preparing and delivering a sermon.[9]

From a communication perspective, the sermon has been defined as a communication event where meaning is co-created between the audience and the speaker.[10] As Craddock explains, "A Sermon is a communication and therefore is to be located as much among a particular group of listeners as with a particular speaker."[11] Hence the sermon should be understood as "…a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed."[12] This definition of the sermon from a communication perspective does not negate other theological definitions or understandings of the sermon (e.g. Martin Luther stating that preaching the Word of God is the Word of God). What this definition facilitates is the understanding that the sermon, as it is being preached, is shaping and reshaping the reality in which the preacher and listener operate. In theological terms, the community of faith is being transformed by the power of the Gospel as the sermon is being preached.[13] Thus, the Christian community of faith is formed into a community through the process of communication embodied in the sermon. This definition of the sermon allows Craddock to stress that he

trusts "…the listeners to arrive at their own conclusions, to do their own thinking and believing in trusting and deciding."[14]

In this paradigm, through an exchange of symbols, the listener and the speaker share subjectively in the objective truth (the Gospel of Jesus Christ) being communicated. This exchange certainly fits within George Mead's understanding of how communication is the foundation for the formation of community,

> That is what makes communication in the significant sense the organizing process in the community. It is not simply a process of transferring abstract symbols; it is always a gesture in a social act which calls out in the individual himself the tendency to the same act that is called out in others.[15]

Therefore, in the preaching event, the sermon listener is an active participant in the communication process, not simply consuming information, but actively making choices and interpretations based on the sermon. Thus, the sermon listener forms his/her own opinions about which sermons communicate effectively as well as the characteristics that make-up those effective or good sermons. At the same time, the preacher must learn from the listener in order to improve his/her effectiveness.

Ethnicity/Culture as Listening Filters

Since the sermon is a communication event where meaning is co-created, it is important to understand which filters are actively used by both the listener and the speaker in the event. One of these filters is ethno-culture.[16] Since this is a very specific lens or filter it is necessary to define it.

A simple definition of ethnicity is offered by the Child Safety Services, Queensland Government, Australia:

> Ethnicity – belonging to a group that shares the same characteristics, such as country of origin, language, religion, ancestry and culture. Ethnicity is a matter of biological and historical fact and is not changed by the culture in which a person grows up.[17]

This definition resonates with a definition offered by Shibutani and Kwan: "An ethnic group consists of those who conceive themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others."[18] Therefore, "ethnicity" does not reflect a single aspect of an individual, but represents a combination of all those non-physical features that distinguishes him/her from those around her/him. Furthermore, it is implied that each ethnic group has a particular set of features that have been shaped by their history and experiences, and that particular set is not repeated in other groups. As missiologist David J. Hesselgrave, explains:

"There are over 3500 ethnic groups in the world and yet no two of them have identical cultural configurations. Each of these societies has a culture which is systemic and patterned."[19] That is why the "labels" that have been designed and popularized by the US Census Bureau (Hispanic, Asian, White, Native American, etc.) are helpful, but can be misused or distort the understanding of ethnicity and culture.[20]

From the above descriptions, it is clear that the elements that distinguish an ethnic group are also the elements of what we understand to be a culture. Like "ethnicity," "culture" has many definitions. A useful definition has been developed by the Child Safety Services of Queensland, Australia:

> Culture - describes what people develop to enable them to adapt to their world, such as language, gestures, tools to enable them to survive and prosper, customs and traditions that define values and organize social interactions, religious beliefs and rituals, and dress, art, and music to make symbolic and aesthetic expressions. Culture determines the practices and beliefs that become associated with an ethnic group and provides its distinctive identity.[21]

As this definition argues, culture is developed as individuals "…adapt to their world." This resonates with the idea forwarded by Andy Crouch. He argues that culture is "making something of the world."[22] For Crouch human interaction with the world around us is what produces culture. As Crouch explains,

> Culture is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it's given to us and make something else. This is the original insight of the writer of Genesis when he says that human beings were made in God's image: just like the original Creator, we are creators. …God gives the primordial man and woman the same task that the baby almost immediately undertakes with the raw materials of her vocal chords, lung and mouth—the same thing that our human ancestors did with stone and fire and pigment on cave walls. They go to work with these recalcitrant raw materials (even the Garden before the fall, it seems, required tilling and keeping), forming and reshaping the world they find themselves in. They begin "making something of the world." [23]

As human beings "make something of the world," a set of beliefs, customs, values and traditions are developed. These elements, which can be called a "worldview," are what help the individual to interpret, understand and interact with the world around him/her, giving meaning to his/her life.[24] This sense of identity shapes actions and thought processes. Orlando Crespo explains:

> As human beings it is impossible to live outside of these integrated systems of belief, values, customs and institutions, for they give us the connectedness and belonging that are essential to the human heart. It is in this environment of culture that God gives us the sense of identity and dignity that are necessary for physical, emotional and mental wholeness. It is culture that frames all that we do…[25]

As can be seen from these definitions, ethnicity and culture are interwoven and do not exist without the other. An individual's ethnicity can be identified by the cultural traits that he/she demonstrates (including language, religion, cuisine, etc.) and vice versa. Of course, this assessment can only be made in general terms, since an individual's personal circumstances or experiences might alter his behavior as to "mask" his ethnicity/culture. As theologians Jeter and Allen argue, "People of the same race, ethnicity, and social class can operate out of different worldviews."[26] Nonetheless, a balance must be achieved between understanding that an individual can "deviate" from her/his ethnically defined cultural traits, and the general characteristics of the group. If such a balance is not developed, any ethnic group can be eliminated and turned into individuals.[27]

Therefore, it is the ethno-culture of an individual that acts as a central lens through which said individual interprets his/her experiences, and in consequence a central filter through which the individual hears and understands a sermon.[28]

The Sermon as a Research Object

The pervasive nature of the sermon and preaching has attracted a certain level of attention from scholars and researchers, which have studied the phenomena from various perspectives. Clifton Guthrie's review of the research on preaching details the different types of studies that have been conducted on the preaching event. These studies range from the preachers' topic, to the relationship between preaching and persuasion, as well as the qualities that make a sermon more effective, and how the training of clergy impacts the effectiveness of the sermon. However, despite the efforts made through these studies, the sermon as a communication event continues to be minimally explored.[29] In part, such a state of research into the preaching event is born out of the multidisciplinary nature of preaching, and the fact that most preachers are trained in seminaries and schools of theology, which are focused on the interpretation of the Bible and theology, and not on the communication of said theological enterprise. As Guthrie argues, "As an academic discipline homiletics has fashioned itself almost exclusively as a field of humanities rather than seeing its object of study—the preaching

event—as a human enterprise that benefits from being scrutinized by a wide range of investigative methods."[30]

Recently, this state of affairs has begun to change as efforts have begun to emerge in the study of the sermon as a communication event, and to focus on the study of the listeners' perspective. Most recently, Allen, et al. conducted a study titled *Listening to Listeners*.[31] This massive study, which has produced five books and several articles, was conducted in the Midwest region of the USA using extensive in-depth interviews and focus groups. The study focused on the listeners and their experience of the sermon, as well as trying to determine how the congregation listens to the sermon.

One of the obvious voids in the studies conducted on the sermon is the lack of work among ethnic/racial minority congregations. While some of the work has been carried out among African-American clergy,[32] and the Allen et al. study did include some African-American congregations, the idea of exploring the preaching event as a communication event among racial/ethnic minorities is anemic. Among the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community two studies have been conducted. A study conducted among Hispanic/Latino (Latina) clergy,[33] which focused on the preacher's understanding of how to develop an effective sermon for Hispanic/Latinos (Latinas); and a study of Hispanic/Latino (Latina) laity (or sermon listeners), that focused on creating a picture of the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) that would aid a majority culture preacher in preparing sermons cross-culturally for the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) listener.[34] This limited amount of research creates a vacuum of information concerning the sermon as a communication event among US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) congregations.

The Sermon within the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) Community

According to the literature, preaching within the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community follows the structure of preaching in other communities.[35] Most books on preaching used within the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community focus on the use of classical or Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical theory.[36] Thus, the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) homiletical literature focuses on Bible interpretation, sermon development, different styles of sermon delivery, and the role of the preacher within the community of faith.[37]

All these textbooks present a number of characteristics of effective preaching. While each author provides his/her own ideas on the characteristics of an effective sermon, in general terms the literature reflect similar characteristics. First, the sermon must be based on the Bible. The biblical text, either used in a single portion or in several portions, is considered the core of the sermon.[38] The second characteristic is closely related to the first. Since, the sermon is based on the Bible, the sermon

then, is a vehicle to convey the teachings of Jesus Christ and other doctrines of the Christian faith. Thirdly, the goal of the sermon is geared towards personal transformation.[39] The sermon is prepared and delivered with the desire to engender spiritual, moral, and psychological change within the individual; thus, it is expected to be a transformational agent in the lives of the listeners. A variation of the idea of personal transformation is the idea of corporate transformation through political and social liberation.[40] This characteristic focuses on the sermon as a vehicle through which communities are empowered to transform societal and political structures to create a more equitable society.[41] Finally, the sermon should seek to engender an emotional connection with the audience.[42] As the preacher delivers the sermon, he or she seeks to affect the emotional state of the audience, since it is believed that an emotional response signifies an appropriation of the message being delivered. While the description of the emotional reaction being sought by the preacher is inconsistent, it is clear that an emotional reaction signifies personal transformation.

Method of the Study

The chosen methodology for this study was the ethnography of communication. The ethnography of communication is a socio-cultural approach grounded in the idea that discourse within a particular group engenders a particular cultural experience.[43] Within this methodological perspective a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach was utilized to seek an understanding of the preaching experience of the study participants. In this perspective, phenomenological refers to how the researcher orients him/herself to the lived experience of the research participants, while hermeneutical refers to the interpretative role the researcher plays in reporting the lived experience.[44] This approach allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of what the individual(s) experiences in a particular communication phenomenon, and how that experience informs his/her understanding and/or appreciation of the phenomenon being studied. Finally, in-depth interviewing was chosen as the methodology to gather data, because it provides an opportunity for a more detailed exploration of the topic, and the lived experience of the individuals being interviewed.[45]

Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted among US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listeners. Of the 25 interviewees, 19 were women and 6 were men; 7 were high school graduates, 15 were college graduates, and 3 had post-graduate degrees. Of the 25 interviewees, two were Roman Catholic, ten attended non-denominational churches, and 13 belonged to several protestant denominations (including Presbyterian Church in America, Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Southern Baptist Convention,

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Assemblies of God). The interviewees represented a variety of nationalities, including: 8 Puerto Ricans, 5 Cubans, 3 Columbians, 2 Mexicans, 2 Dominicans, 2 Peruvian, 1 Honduran, 1 Ecuadorian, and 1 Venezuelan.

The interviewees were recruited through several venues, including personal contact through word of mouth, social media, and invitations posted in bulletin boards in a local Christian university. The interviewees were selected using a four-fold criterion: first, all the participants were of Hispanic/Latino (Latina) descent.[46] Second, to narrow the scope, participation was limited to individuals professing to be Christians, which included Protestants (including various denominational and non-denominational expressions), Roman Catholics, and other expressions of the Christian faith. The choice to narrow the scope of the study was determined by the role that preaching has within the Christian faith, as compared to other religions.[47] Third, it was expected that the participant would have some level of involvement in religious worship services, where they would be exposed to the listening of sermons. The last characteristic was that participants must not engage in preaching either as clergy or lay-preachers. This criterion sought to eliminate individuals that had received some level of training in the preparation of sermons, and thus their opinions about the topic would reflect the bias created by their training. There was no specific strategy to recruit participants that would give preference to a particular pattern of denominational backgrounds, ages, educational level, economic status, nationality, etc. The specific pattern that emerged reflects the willingness of individuals to participate in the research project, and not a conscious effort on the part of the researcher to discriminate among participants.

On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes, with some extending over an hour and one lasting for two hours. The length of the interviews was determined by the interviewees' engagement of and/or interest on the topic. The questions for the interview were designed as open-ended questions with the goal of exploring the opinions held by the interviewees concerning the sermon as a communication event.

As stated before, the purpose of the study is to discover the characteristics of a "good sermon" from the perspective of the Hispanic/Latino (Latina) listener. The question might be posed as to why seek to define the characteristics of a "good sermon," and not the characteristics of an "effective sermon." The literature in the field places the burden on the preacher developing "effective sermons." However, the idea of an "effective sermon" can only be measured by determining the intended goal of the preacher, and not the experience of the listener. Once the goal of the individual preacher is ascertained, the researcher could determine if the goal

of the preacher was achieved. However, the intent of the preacher can only be measured from individual preacher to individual preacher, and it is very difficult to generalize and/or replicate. The idea of this study was to reverse the process, and explore the experience of the listener in order to determine what they consider as the characteristics of a sermon that produces the listener's desired outcome or experience. By seeking the characteristics of a "good sermon," the burden is on the listener's lived experience, and not the preacher's intent. Only the listener can determine if the sermon had an impact on his/her life, and the weight of the impact that the sermon had. By focusing on the characteristics of a "good sermon," the study seeks to determine how the listeners are impacted by the sermon, and how that impact may be replicated in different Hispanic/Latino (Latina) faith communities.

In the analysis of the data, three (3) ideas emerged that could not be qualified as characteristics of a good sermon. These three (3) ideas, the Purpose of the Sermon, the Bible as the Foundation of the Sermon, and Identification with the Preacher, act as a paradigm through which the sermon is analyzed by the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener as s/he experiences the preaching event.

The Purpose of the Sermon

Almost unanimously, the interviewees stated that the purpose of the sermon is to have a transformative encounter with God. The sermon was perceived as a transcendental experience that brought the listeners in a direct encounter with God. According to the interviewees, this encounter produces an affective, moral/ethical, and religious change in the life of the listener. Further, the interviewees described the encounter as a moment in which the listener hears God's voice through the sermon. While the descriptions themselves varied, all the descriptions reflected the idea that the sermon is an encounter with God. Interestingly, some of the descriptions of the encounter with God were not positive. Some interviewees stated that the sermon is a confrontation with God in which God rebukes, challenges, and admonishes the individual listener and the gathered community audience to a lifestyle change. It is interesting to note the interviewees did not describe the experience as necessarily pleasant. The interviewees stated that at times this encounter is an emotionally painful event that produced an affective and spiritual catharsis, which produced moral/ethical and affective changes in the part of the interviewees. Despite the negative feelings engendered by the encounter, the interviewees believed that the purpose of the sermon was fulfilled when it produced such a confrontation, since the confrontation produced a renewed desire to "grow closer" to God. Although the nature of the encounter can be experienced as a confrontation, the interviewees

stated that the delivery of the sermon does not need to be confrontational in nature. For the interviewees, the confrontation happens in the content and/or the main idea conveyed by the sermon and not the delivery style (issues of delivery will be addressed later).

Some interviewees, while describing the sermon as an encounter with God, believed that the encounter carried a message from God that produces wisdom, allowing the listeners to make personal, familial, and social decisions in relation with what is perceived as the will of God. These interviewees believed that the sermon is an encounter with God that facilitates focusing on an individual's personal identity in relation to a different moral and religious understanding.

In contrast, the two Roman Catholic interviewees understood the whole Mass as an encounter with God, and saw the sermon as part of that encounter, but not as a separate entity from the Mass. This distinction is reflective of the theological traditions that separate Roman Catholics and Protestants on the nature of the sermon. While Roman Catholic doctrine and practice place a level of importance on the Liturgy of the Word, which includes the homily or sermon, the Eucharist holds a higher place of esteem within the Mass.[48] In contrast, Protestants hold in higher regard the reading of scripture and the sermon itself.[49] While the two Roman Catholic interviewees held a different belief for the purpose of the sermon itself, it is important to note that they believed that the sermon is an important tool for personal moral/ethical development.

The Bible as the Foundation of the Sermon

Almost unanimously, the interviewees (the two Roman Catholic interviewees being the exception) believed that the sermon must be based on the Bible. By "based on the Bible," the interviewees stated that preachers must use a portion of the Bible from which to design the message for the sermon. Further, a large portion of the interviewees expressed a preference for sermons that explain what a particular portion or portions of the Bible mean, and how the ideas within that text can and should inform the moral/ethical choices of the individual. For the interviewees, the idea of the Bible as the foundation of the sermon has a direct correlation with the purpose of the sermon as an encounter with God. Thus, in their minds, the sermon can fulfill its purpose as an encounter with God, when the sermon is based on the Bible. Further, most of the interviewees believed that when the sermon is not based on the Bible it lacks transcendental authority or endowment. Finally, the interviewees stated that there was no preference on how many texts (a single or multiples) of the Bible were used to craft the sermon. Hence, the

emphasis expressed was on the use of the Bible, and how it was explained rather than a preference for a textual or thematic sermon.

Once again, the two Roman Catholic interviewees differed from their Protestant counterparts on this idea and did not place prominence in the use of the Bible as the basis for the sermon. Both of these individuals acknowledged the importance of the Bible. However, they considered that the sermon could also be based on other religious texts within the Christian tradition, i.e., the writings of saints, Popes, or church theologians, and/or the personal experiences of the preacher. This distinction with their Protestant counterparts could be reflective of the emphasis that Protestants place on the use and centrality of Bible in the Christian life and preaching.[50]

Identification with the Preacher

The last of the three foundational ideas is the listeners' identification with the preacher. For the interviewees, this was a crucial aspect of the sermon experience. While the interviewees did not openly acknowledge this idea, the interviews revealed that for most of them, their relationship with the preacher, the preacher's personal and religious identity in and outside of the preaching moment, how the preacher uses the Bible to craft the sermon, and how the preacher interacts with the audience outside of the preaching moment had a significant impact on the quality of the sermon. Such a view of the sermon listeners' relationship with the preacher correlates with Kenneth Burke's idea of Identification.[51]

For the interviewees, Identification occurs through different sources: the correlation of the preacher's private life to his/her public religious life; the perceived personal commitment in the part of the preacher to the well-being of the local church or religious community; and the preacher's level of candidness as s/he shares his/her religious, emotional, or personal struggles in relation to the message being conveyed in the sermon. According to the interviewees, these personal characteristics, which they use to relate or identify with the preacher, assist them in engaging the sermon at both an emotional and religious level.

The Characteristics of a Good Sermon

The interviews revealed three (3) major characteristics of a "good" sermon for the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener. These three characteristics focused on the content of the sermon. There were also a set of minor characteristics that emerged from the data, which can be understood under the rubric of the delivery or presentation of the sermon.

The most consistent characteristic identified by the interviewees was the idea that a "good" sermon is transformational. According to the interviewees,

since the sermon is an encounter with God and is based on the Bible, then a "good" sermon is transformational. For the interviewees, a "good" sermon confronts the individual listeners and the community as a whole to live differently. For the interviewees, this reorientation of the behavior is reflected through a realignment of the individual's identity in relationship with God. As stated above, this confrontation can be emotionally difficult. As Maria a 26 year-old mother of two explained it, "the sermon must pierce your life… it has to force me to say 'I have to change this or that…'" However, the interviewees understood the confrontation as part of a spiritual, emotional, and/or moral/ethical developmental process, which for the interviewees makes the individual more reflective of the character of God. According to the interviewees, a "good" sermon achieves this aim by providing a vision of a lifestyle reflective of biblical teachings. Some of the interviewees expressed this transformation in very practical terms, such as being a better father or employee or daughter, or how to better cope with the challenges of daily life. Nonetheless, the idea was one of transformation. Joel a 32 year-old police officer explains, "…the Holy Spirit controls what the person hears… God uses that word specifically to teach a particular idea… for a specific purpose in my life… so that I can do God's will."

In contrast to popular wisdom, interviewees reject the idea of the sermon as a motivational speech. By motivational speech, they meant a sermon designed and focused on the purpose of engendering self-help and personal empowerment to achieve personal goals. Most interviewees expressed the belief that a motivational speech is superficial, and does not produce the desired spiritual change. However, they did believe that a sermon can have motivational elements, such as the idea that an individual is capable of affecting changes in her or his behavior, and lifestyle, and that the individual is endowed by God with the necessary resources to address personal challenges. Nonetheless, they believed that these personal ideals could only be achieved through the supernatural and transcendental experience of God in the individual's life, and that the sermon should be reflective of that idea, and not the self-empowerment found in contemporary motivational speeches.

The second characteristic that emerged from the interviews is the idea that a "good" sermon resonates with the Truth. The interviewees believe that a "good" sermon "sounds" true to the daily experience of the listeners and the intersection of God's plans or will with that experience. For Milagros, a 42 year-old banker, the sermon has to be "a mirror in which I see my life as it is." Similarly, Charlie a 34 year-old barber, described the sermon as reflecting, "the story of my life… the challenges that I face." While Aradi a 62 year-old retiree, stated: "I want to hear how my life and God's will interject." The idea that a "good" sermon resonates with the Truth reflects a desire for an

authentic encounter with God that transcends the mundane and provides the listener with an alternative vision or life narrative based on God's will. When pressed on this issue, the interviewees believed that this characteristic is achieved when the preacher is honest. As Jose, a 21 year-old student, stated: "the preacher… doesn't pull any 'punches'… is not afraid to make people uncomfortable." The idea of the sermon resonating with the truth, as described by the interviewees, correlates with Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, and the role that MacIntyre assigns to narrative in his moral theory.[52] They both argue that human beings use narratives as the means to understand and process truth statements or ideas. This leads to the use of narratives to help us arrive at moral and/or ethical decisions. The interviewees' desire for the sermon to consist of a true narrative, and their use of the sermon narrative as a means to incorporate their personal narrative to the biblical narrative confirms both Fisher and MacIntyre's ideas, and the need for preachers to make sure that the sermon becomes a point of intersection between God's narrative and the listeners' narrative in order to encourage transformation.

The last of the three characteristics is that a "good" sermon connects the Bible to daily life. Interviewees almost unanimously agreed that a "good" sermon helps the audience connect the ideas and teachings of the Bible with the challenges and experiences of daily life. The idea is for the audience to see how biblical teaching can inform the decisions and actions that affect their familial, work, and personal relationships; their personal commitments within society; and their moral/ethical choices. As Geovani, a 28 year-old sales clerk explains "…the sermon needs to be concrete, so that I can use it as a guide." While, Helen a 29 year-old teacher, stated "…the sermon needs to be explicit about how the Bible applies to my life." In addition, the interviewees believed that as the preacher demonstrates the relevancy of the biblical text to the audience's experiences, the desire for personal change increases. Again the interviewees almost unanimously agreed that the way for the preacher to relate the Bible to daily life is for the preacher to illustrate his points with "real life" stories from his/her personal life or related events within the community or society-at-large. In contrast, the interviewees rejected the idea of the preacher focusing on politics or associating biblical teaching with partisan politics. For interviewees, the relevancy of the Bible for their daily lives was more important than the possible connections with current political/social problems that might be highlighted by the preacher. As Lizette, a 33 year-old computer technician, stated, "…the sermon is not for talking politics, I get enough of that on the news."

Delivery/Presentation Concerns

The interviewees shared several items (which can be considered issues of delivery or presentation) that in their opinion were critical to experiencing a "good" sermon. There was no unanimous set of characteristics in this area. However, a few characteristics or ideas were mentioned several times. First, a good sermon is well prepared and has a strong organizational structure. The ideas flow well and the different parts relate to each other. As Cintia, a 32 year-old sales clerk, stated, "…it has to be well organized and make sense, not thrown together." For the interviewees who raised this point there is no emphasis on a particular structural design (deductive, inductive, or storytelling) as long as the sermon is well organized. Second, the preacher must create a sense of personal connection with the audience by using a conversational style with a common vocabulary, without a judgmental tone, or "talking down" to the listeners. Claudia, a 32 year-old lawyer, described it as, "…don't yell at the congregation, don't be condescending; speak to us clearly so that we can understand you." The preacher should also keep eye contact with the audience. A few interviewees complained that when the preacher reads the sermon it becomes a distraction. Third, the preacher can and should show emotions, but not use histrionics. According to the interviewees, those over-the-top performances detract from the moment. As Vanessa, a 33 year-old unemployed cook, stated, "… if you get too emotional it feels like a show, emotion is ok, but it should be normal." Finally, while there was no agreement on the optimal length of a "good" sermon (some stated one hour, others 20 minutes), the average of the responses to the question was 35 minutes.

Conclusion

This research project accomplished its purpose by identifying the characteristics of a "good" sermon from the perspective of the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) sermon listener. The identification of these characteristics can help preachers within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community to develop sermons that are more likely to effectively communicate the intended ideas to the listeners. In addition, this study demonstrates that sermon listeners have a clear understanding of the type of sermon characteristics that make the preaching event an effective tool of religious communication. Finally, since the listeners are able to identify these characteristics, the study affirms the idea that the listeners are active participants in the preaching event, which makes the preaching event a phenomenon where meaning is co-created. This reality invites preachers from all ethnic groups within the USA and across the globe to seek a better understanding of their listeners, and to discover their perspective in what makes a good sermon.

Despite the study's positive results, the project leaves some questions unanswered. First, would a larger and more diverse pool of participants create a different set of characteristics or confirm these findings? While the groups of interviewees represented a diverse cross section of the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community, the interviewees reflected a larger percentage of college graduates than the national average for US Hispanics/Latinos (Latinas). This collective characteristic has the possibility of masking some nuances within the findings. Second, would a larger representation of Roman Catholic participants create a different set of characteristics? The number of Roman Catholic interviewees was not representative of the percentage of Roman Catholics among US Hispanic/Latinos (Latinas). Such a variance could have an effect on the identified characteristics. Given the theological and sociological differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants it may be more effective to conduct separate studies within each of these communities and then compare results. Third, what are the emotions or emotional response that a "good sermon" produces in the listener? What role do emotions play in the processing of the messages received from the preacher? This is an area well beyond the scope of the study; however, it can be a significant contribution to our understanding of the role sermons play in the life of the individual and the community beyond the religious/ethical sphere. Finally, how do the findings of this study compare to the idea of a "good sermon" within other ethnic groups within the USA? The focused group of this study was the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community and the lived experience of that community; however, trying to understand how one group compares to others can help educators in seminaries and theological schools in the process of curriculum design for the preparation of clergy.

Preaching is a complex task. However, listening to the listeners can help the preacher to communicate more effectively and perhaps achieve better outcomes. Therefore, this study has begun a process of helping preachers within the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) community become better communicators. By helping these preachers develop a better understanding of their audience, the process of effective communication with their audience can improve dramatically. I hope that this study will become a conversation starter and a source of information that will benefit the US Hispanic/Latino (Latina) Church and the Church at large.

End Notes

[1] This study was made possible through a grant from the Louisville Institute, Louisville, KY.

[2] Cilfton F. Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings." *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2007: 70.

[3] Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*. Nashville, (TN: Abingdon Press) 1985: 25.

[4] Cilfton F. Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings." *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2007: 70.

[5] Ibid., 65.

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[7] Paul S. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004: 2.

[8] Karl Barth. *Homiletics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991: 17.

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[10] Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey*. Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000; Coggan, Donald. *Preaching: The Sacrament of the Word*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988; Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985.

[11] Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985: 31.

[12] James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communiation." In *Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions*, eds. Robert T. Craig and Heidi L. Muller (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 43.

[13] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preacing: Redeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005: 267.

[14] Fred B. Craddock, "Inductive Preaching Renewed." in *The Renewed Homiletic*, ed. O. Wesley Allen, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2010), 54.

[15] Geroge H. Mead, "The Social Foundations and Functions of Thought and Communication." in *Theorizing Communication: Readings Across Traditions*, eds. Robert T. Craig and Heidi L. Muller (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 376.

[16] I use this term to delineate the culture that ethnic groups develop and to distinguish it from other types of cultures developed by social groupings.

[17] Child Safety Services, Queensland Government, Australia. "Intercountry Adoptive Parent Education: Definition of ethicnity, culture and Identity (Module 6)." Child Safety Services, Queensland Government. October 19, 2007. (accessed May 3, 2009) http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/adoption/education/intercountry/ module6/definition-ethnicity.html.

[18] T. Shibutani and K. M. Kwan. *Ethnic Stratification: A Comparative Approach*. New York: Macmillan, 1965: 47.

[19] David J.Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An introduction to missionary communication*, 2nd Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991: 101-102.

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[21] Child Safety Services, Queensland Government, Australia. "Intercountry Adoptive Parent Education: Definition of ethicnity, culture and Identity (Module 6)." Child Safety Services, Queensland Government. October 19, 2007. (accessed May 3, 2009) http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/adoption/education/intercountry/module6/definition-ethnicity.html.

[22] Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008: 23.

[23] Ibid. 23.

[24] Ibid. 24.

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[27] Chuck Van Engen, "Planting Multi-Ethinc Congregations in North America." *The Journal of The Society for Church Growth*, 2000: 33.

[28] J.R. Nieman and T. G. Rogers. *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001:25-27.

[29] Clifton F. Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings." *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2007: 69.

[30] Ibid. 67.

[31] R.J. Allen, D.P. Andrews, L.S. Bond, J.S. McClure, D.P. Moseley, and G.L. Ramsey, Jr. *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004.

[32] Cilfton F. Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings." *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2007.

[33] Pablo J. Rivera Madera, *Preaching to Hispanic Immigrants: Practical Advice for Effectiveness*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2011.

[34] T.G. Rogers and M.B. de Souza, "Preaching Cross-Culturally to Spanish-Speaking U.S. Hispanic Americans." *Homiletic*, 2003.

[35] J.L. Gonzalez and P.A. Jimenez. *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.

[36] This reflects the fact that most Hispanic/Latino (Latina) homiletical theorists in the USA have been trained in using the same textbooks and homiletical schools of thought as other ethnic groups.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Pablo A. Jiménez, *Principios de Predicación*. Nashvile, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003.

[39] Pablo J. Rivera Madera, *Preaching to Hispanic Immigrants: Practical Advice for Effectiveness*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2011.

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[46] Following the US Census Bureau definition, a Hispanic/Latino (Latina) is an individual whose ethnic background originates in Central or South America, and the Spanish-speaking island-nations of the Caribbean Sea area.

[47] Clifton F. Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings." *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 2007: 70.

[48] US Conference of Catholic Bishops. "General Instructions of the Roman Missal." US Conference of Catholic Bishops. July 24, 2010 (accessed January 31, 2013) http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/.

[49] Theodore G. Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007: 325.

[50] Paul S. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004: 7.

[51] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969. Identification is the term used by Burke to explain the level of relatedness between the audience and the speaker. Burke used the word Substance to refer to the overall make-up of a person, including: physical characteristics, beliefs and values, education, socio-economic background, etc. The more congruence between the Substance of the speaker and that of the audience, the more Identification occurs. Burke refers to the intersection of both Substances as "consubstantiation," a term he borrowed from Martin Luther's theological description of what occurs during the Holy Communion or the Eucharist.

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