

Crossover Preaching:
Intercultural-Improvisational
Homiletics in Conversation with
Gardner C. Taylor (SIET)

Available November 2015

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What Makes a Crossover Preacher?

The venue was Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York in 1960; the gathering was a regional Baptist Ministers Conference; and the occasion was a fundraiser for the Martin Luther King Defense Fund. White and nonwhite clergy and laypeople gathered there because they wanted to raise \$10,000 to cover expenses for King's legal defense in Alabama. Dr. Taylor, knowing that some in the audience had pockets deep enough to cover King's legal fees, aware that King's name was well known and widely regarded, took the podium and said the following to those gathered for the fundraiser, "I feel like a mosquito in a nudist colony. I know what I'm here for, but I don't know where to start." The place erupted in laughter, and the financial goal was met.

This story provides a brief snapshot into what makes Taylor a unique case study in crossover preaching: his attunement to space, attentiveness to listeners, capacity for humor, and rhetorical timing. But the actual claim of this book is that Taylor was more than just a good joke teller or public speaker. His contemporary significance to homiletics centers on two proficiencies in particular that mark him out as a forerunner, a harbinger of preaching's future: *improvisational proficiency and intercultural proficiency*. These proficiencies are not only neglected in historical-homiletical assessments of Taylor but, of greater import to homiletics, they are the same proficiencies that preachers and homileticians need now more than ever to serve a church with an intercultural future here in the United States.

At least two questions are worth considering at the outset of this chapter: *Why choose Gardner C. Taylor?* and *Was Gardner C. Taylor really a crossover preacher?*

As to the first: Is studying a preacher from a bygone era worth so much time and energy, especially if the aim is to chart a course for the future? Perhaps an analysis of Taylor's preaching is better suited to an honorific entry in an encyclopedia of preaching or a journal entry in a church history periodical. Moreover, is not the setting for his preaching ministry anachronistic? A number of signs point to this conclusion. Gone is the age of building neo-Gothic church cathedrals. Generally speaking, congregations in the United States no longer build cathedral-like structures as Harry Emerson Fosdick did when he built the Riverside Church with John D. Rockefeller's money, or Taylor did when his congregation rebuilt the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn. While congregations still build large structures today, these buildings look nothing like the neo-Gothic architecture that once exemplified Western-establishment Christendom. Likewise, gone is the heyday of the nationally and internationally prominent radio preacher. Although some preachers today have successful radio ministries, their listening audiences do not rival the national and international audiences who listened to Taylor and other preachers on the *NBC National Radio Pulpit* or *The Art of Living* in the mid-twentieth century. Gone also is the golden age of preaching in New York City—the 1940s and 1950s—when preachers such as Harry Emerson

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BOOK EXCERPT

Jared E. Alcántara (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is assistant professor of homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. An ordained Baptist minister, he has served as a youth pastor, associate pastor and teaching pastor in Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon and New Jersey. He has also served as an adjunct instructor at Gordon-Conwell's Hispanic Ministries Program in New York City and as a doctoral teaching fellow in homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Alcántara's teaching and research is primarily in homiletics, with other interests in global south preaching and the role of race and ethnicity in preaching, especially in Latino/a and African American contexts. He lives in the Chicagoland area with his wife, Jennifer, and their three daughters.

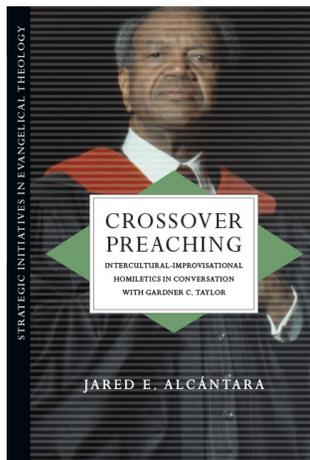
Fosdick, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Sandy F. Ray, George Buttrick, Ralph W. Sockman, and Paul Scherer were household names in the city and, in some cases, prominent at the national level.

To be sure, the pulpit prince, the neo-Gothic church cathedral, the nationally and internationally prominent radio preacher, and the national preaching circuit that Taylor traveled are long gone. So too are the days of Jim Crow-era segregation, white numerical hegemony, and mainline liberal Protestantism at the controlling centers of US society. So then what does a preacher who belongs to a bygone era contribute to an intercultural church with an intercultural future? The answer lies not in what marks out Taylor's time period as a product of the past; rather, it lies in what distinguishes Taylor in the present from the other pulpit princes of his day. *Taylor was an improvisational-intercultural preacher who lived ahead of his time, a harbinger of crossover preaching proficiency.*

This leads to the second question—*Was Gardner C. Taylor really a "crossover preacher"*? Did he engage with and account for difference? Do not the data suggest otherwise? How can one claim that Taylor was an improvisational-intercultural preacher who crossed borders of racial and ecumenical difference when Concord Baptist, the church he served for forty-two years, was more than 98 percent African American during his tenure there? If Taylor was both improvisational and intercultural, then why wasn't Concord more racially and ethnically diverse when he was pastor? Wouldn't a preacher with a racially and ethnically diverse congregation be a more suitable alternative? If we confined the list of candidates to New York City, more recent names would come to mind, such as James Forbes during his tenure at the Riverside Church, or Jim Cymbala at the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church. These two churches are more diverse than Concord was, and these two pastors were and are committed to diversity and inclusion. Is Taylor the best person on whom to confer the crossover preacher designation?

As this chapter unfolds, it will become clear why *crossover preacher* is a more-than-apt description for Taylor. This designation will reveal new dimensions to understanding Taylor's preaching, dimensions that have not been previously considered, and it will also frame his contemporary significance to homiletics. If Taylor was an improvisational-intercultural preacher who lived ahead of his time, then an analysis of his preaching not only sheds new light on past understandings of Taylor's contribution to preaching; it also illumines a path for the future of preaching.

— Taken from Chapter 1,
"Gardner C. Taylor: Case Study in Crossover Preaching"



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“On Easter Sunday 2015, Gardner C. Taylor left this world for a better one. But his long and productive life casts a long shadow, and his extraordinary pulpit work merits the kind of close analysis Alcántara offers in this book. Taylor emerges here as a paradigmatic ‘crossover’ preacher, prescient and prophetic, a watchman on the wall with a word from the Lord for his time and for ours.”

– Timothy George, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, general editor of the Reformation Commentary on Scripture

A Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor

What made you want to write a book about Gardner C. Taylor? How did his life’s work impact you?

Jared Alcántara: I was motivated to write this book for several reasons. First, in choosing Taylor as my case study, I saw the opportunity available to write about someone whose historical contribution was nearly lost and whose contemporary relevance was unknown. As someone writing from outside the black church, I also saw an opportunity for intercultural engagement. Second, I saw a need for homileticians in the US to rethink their theoretical and practical assumptions in light of rapidly changing demographics in the population of the country, the church, and seminaries and divinity schools. This project on this particular person helped me think about what homiletical theory might look like in the twenty-first century in the US context.

What are you attempting to show in *Crossover Preaching* through the work of Taylor?

Alcántara: In this book, I argue that the way to bring homiletics into congruence with demographic shifts in the US church is to develop a *crossover homiletic* that engages with and accounts for difference. The thesis I propose is as follows: *An analysis of Gardner C. Taylor’s preaching reveals an improvisational-intercultural approach that, in light of recent developments in improvisational and intercultural theory, illumines his contemporary significance to preaching and homiletics in the US now and in the future.* No one in my field is asking the question, “How do we preach to an intercultural church with an intercultural future?” I am trying to anticipate this need.

What makes *Crossover Preaching* stand out amidst all the other books in the missions category?

Alcántara:

1. This book examines Gardner C. Taylor’s contemporary significance, but does so through a different lens. Other scholarly contributions have examined his rhetorical dimensions, his eschatology or his theology of proclamation. This project considers his improvisational and intercultural proficiency.
2. This book “weighs in” on contemporary debates in African American theology and African American homiletics by using Gardner C. Taylor’s preaching / theology of preaching to reframe the debates.
3. This book is intentionally interdisciplinary in a way that other projects in my field are not. I attempt to enlist multiple interlocutors in performance studies, race theory, systematic theology, intercultural competence theory and pedagogy.

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