



## AN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN PREACHER'S PROBLEM WITH ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN (ANA) PREACHING: SOME PERSONAL THOUGHTS

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My problem with Asian North American (ANA) preaching has less to do with the preaching of ANA preachers, than it does the ANA label, which I find to be 1) both too broad and too narrow to be of any real worth, and 2) a friend to those who would keep Sunday morning the most segregated hour in "America," or, to put it negatively (or positively, as is, in fact, the case), an enemy to the work of the church.

Let me address the first issue first. To wit: North America consists of more than the United States and Canada; the continent includes Mexico, the seven central American nations, the Caribbean countries, and Greenland; and Asia is comprised of even more countries, not only China, South Korea, and Japan, but Uzbekistan, North Korea, India, the Philippines, Syria, and literally dozens of others. In other words, if there is such a thing as ANA preaching, the terminology suggests, even demands, that it encompass more than the preaching done by people of East Asian heritage who reside in the United States and Canada. Yet, it is precisely this latter group that is typically in view when ANA preaching is discussed.

In the preface to their thought-provoking *Finding Our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching*, for instance, authors Matthew Kim and Daniel Wong name their focus as "English-speaking, second- and multi-generational, US- and Canadian-born Asian North Americans. Further, because of our own experience in these contexts, we will primarily address those from East Asian backgrounds like our own, namely ethnic

Koreans and Chinese.”<sup>1</sup> But if that is the case, why not call the preaching under consideration something more precise than ANA? Our words and our terminology matter. While they add their desire “that other ANAs will find we are describing their experiences as well,” it is not at all obvious to me that a North Korean refugee in Vancouver and a third-generation Filipino in Silicon Valley necessarily share more in common with each other than they do those in the neighborhoods where they live and work. Moreover, simply because two people living in the United States, say, happen to share the same ancestral country of origin, that hardly means they are all that similar. One person may hail from Kerala, another from Manipur (or Xinjiang and Jilin); they may have little more in common than an Indian (or Chinese) passport.

While it is true that Chinese and Korean churches dominate the landscape when it comes to ANA churches, they are far from the only ones. (In my immediate neighborhood, for instance, there are at least two Filipino churches, a South Asian congregation, a Japanese church, a Vietnamese church, a Syrian Orthodox church, and one made up predominantly of people from Syria and Jordan. By definition, these are all ANA churches!) Omitting others only further marginalizes already marginalized voices. And while it is also true that ANAs share commonalities vis-à-vis identity, we—I write as a Chinese-born Canadian—are hardly alone in that respect. Many other groups wrestle with competing cultural allegiances, exclusion from mainstream society, and the like. So when Kim and Wong note that showing honor to parents is a cultural touchstone for many ANAs, I find myself thinking surely that’s the case in virtually every racial group; that there are many who believe, and demonstrate through their words and actions, that their moms (or dads) are the real MVPs.

What, in the end, is the value of the ANA label? It is at once both too broad to accurately describe the varied experiences of North Americans whose ancestors lived throughout Asia, and too narrow in its actual usage where it refers primarily, if not exclusively, to Chinese/Korean US-Americans/Canadians.

Frankly, the ANA label does nothing to change the perception that Asians are all alike; it confirms it. In reality, there is no normative ANA experience.

Nor does ANA preaching that happens in the context of ANA churches do anything to help desegregate our communities. Surely preaching which seeks to cast a vision of a multiethnic New Jerusalem (Rev 7:9) is strengthened by efforts to break out of monoethnic ecclesial enclaves.

I am writing this on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my baptism at a Chinese church in Toronto, Canada, the city where I was born and raised. Before becoming a Christian, my closest friends reflected the diversity of my urban upbringing: an orthodox Jewish believer, an atheist immigrant from Iran, friends whose families hailed from Israel, Pakistan, and the Caribbean islands. After becoming a Christian, I spent increasingly more time with people from my Chinese church, until one day I looked around and realized my closest friends had all become Chinese-born Canadians. Sometimes I say, half tongue-in-cheek, it took becoming a Christian for me to become a racist. Why do ANA churches exist, beyond ministering to first-generation immigrants in their mother tongue? Why don't more non-ANA churches hire ANA senior pastors?

If the church is to be a city on a hill (Matt 5:14) that shows the world an alternative and better way of living, one more in line with God's design, I am oblivious as to how ANA churches (or any churches that are divided along racial and ethnic bloodlines, for that matter), are able to do that. How do we show those outside the church that we are disciples of Jesus who love one another (John 13:35) when we do not worship together; when we only gather with birds of a similar feather?

## IF NOT ANA PREACHING, THEN WHAT?

I contend that what ANA preachers most need is not a distinctively ANA homiletical voice, but what has always been most needed. Over a hundred years ago, G. Campbell Morgan said "the man [*sic*] who preaches the Cross must be a crucified

man. You may preach the Cross and it is nothing but a Roman gibbet unless you preach it from yourself. It is the crucified man that can preach the Cross. Said Thomas 'Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails . . . I will not believe. Dr. Parker of London said that what Thomas said of Christ, the world is saying about the Church. And the world is saying to every preacher: Unless I see in your hands the print of the nails I will not believe.'"<sup>2</sup>

In other words, what ANA preachers need most is not technique or theory, but to resemble Jesus in every respect, including and especially in His suffering. It is how we best serve our people, regardless of their race and ethnicity, and I lament any and every omission of this primary need in homiletical discussions.

The world does not want more talk from those inside the church; it wants action. It is what Christians want, too. We all want preachers who not only look to Jesus as their Savior and submit to His rule as their King, but who follow Him as their Example, which means proclaiming good news to the poor and liberty to the captives and the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19), including those marginalized on account of their skin color.

This is not naïveté. Having lived throughout Canada and the United States, I have had racist words spat in my face in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Philadelphia, and New York. I know how much it hurts. People have told me to go back to China (and Japan). In a Starbucks, a White woman told me that I cannot be Canadian because I do not look Canadian. I have even heard racist remarks from elders I have served with as a senior pastor of a multiethnic church. When discussing a proposal to partner with a Chinese church in the city, one of my non-Asian elders said, "I don't trust them. Chinese people are so sneaky." Another non-Asian elder immediately added his agreement. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. I stopped the meeting and rebuked them. (We cannot denounce racism when our churches are low-key bastions of it.) The first elder said, "I didn't mean you, Pastor," as if that somehow made racism okay. I don't

know why I was surprised to encounter this attitude in my church, when it so obviously exists in other churches.

Ten years ago, for example, someone named Ben Peays, then the executive director of The Gospel Coalition, uploaded a video to the organization's web site (which has since been removed but lives on at his personal Vimeo account) titled "What's Next for Francis Chan? A Conversation with Mark Driscoll and Joshua Harris."<sup>3</sup> In the clip, the three men sit around a table and talk while cameras record their interaction. Forty seconds into their discussion Driscoll calls Chan, a Chinese American, "the international man of Fu Manchu mystery." The men laugh, but there is nothing funny, humorous, or comical about these hurtful, offensive, and racially-loaded, even racist, words. No one stopped the conversation to rebuke Driscoll. That the video made it past The Gospel Coalition content editors was shocking to me when I first watched it a decade ago. Someone should have called on him to repent. Either of the other men at the table with him could and should have done it; neither did (at least, not in the recording). Someone else at The Gospel Coalition who saw the video, which never should have been posted, could have written a public apology. Things like this cause individuals, churches, and yes, even Coalitions, to lose credibility—and rightly so.

But the solution to these vitriolic remarks is not to withdraw into, or stay enclosed inside, an ANA church bubble, as tempting and comfortable as that may be for ANAs. To do so would only perpetuate the White-power status quo. Rather, all preachers, regardless of their race and ethnicity, who desire to resemble Jesus, can begin to combat racism in their churches by being more thoughtful with their words, and condemning racist language and behavior and racialized attitudes and microaggressions<sup>4</sup> whenever they encounter it. One way to do this is if ministers of all races and ethnicities, ministering in churches of all different kinds, invited ministers from other races and ethnicities to preach from their pulpits. Surely that would communicate something of the nature of the gospel and our gospel-shaped relationships with one another.

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Preachers would also do well to continue learning about other cultures that are not their own, and encouraging their churches to engage in cross-cultural fellowship and work. (How else will we bring the gospel to all nations if we cannot relate with people who are unlike us?) To that end, I encourage preachers to read Kim and Wong's *Finding Our Voice*. While I disagree with their assessment that "ANA preachers are in need of a unique homiletical voice akin to other minority groups such as African American and Hispanic American preaching traditions," there is much in it that will reward careful reading.

Preachers do even better by spending time getting to know the ANA people in their (ideally, multiethnic) churches. Much is made of the importance that pastor-preachers be cultural exegetes. Not that this is unimportant (though I do think its value is overstated), but macro statements encompassing whole swaths of people from any particular continent or country is, by nature, rife with generalizations that will not be accurate for everyone from that particular place. Instead, preachers should have expert knowledge concerning personal micro cultures; that is, we should strive to know the actual people under our charge as well as we possibly can. It's fine to know that ANAs are generally like this or like that; it is of incalculably greater worth to know that Banu in your church moved from Ankara to Springfield with her single mother and older brother when she was ten. This—knowing people on their own terms, letting their stories and voices speak for themselves—is better by far than any generic label we might attach to entire populations, which, in fact, consist of unique individuals, each one handcrafted in the image of God.

## NOTES

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1. See Matthew D. Kim and Daniel L. Wong, *Finding Our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020). All references to this book in my paper are taken from the Kindle edition.

2. *Evangelism* (Chicago: Revell, 1904), 58.

3. [vimeo.com/14452343](https://vimeo.com/14452343).

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4. There is a scene in the remake of *The Karate Kid* (2010; which is about kung fu, and has nothing to do with karate, which is a Japanese martial art), starring Jackie Chan and Jaden Smith, when Smith's character is on a Beijing-bound plane with his mother, played by Taraji P. Henson. Henson's character encourages Smith to practice his Mandarin by speaking with an Asian passenger seated nearby. Smith reluctantly asks him for his name (in very decent Mandarin, by the way). The passenger replies: "Dude, I'm from Detroit." Casual, race-based assumptions like that displayed by Smith's character are all too common examples of microaggression.