Commentary: Revisiting Baylor's list: What does an effective preacher look like?

May 9, 2018
(RNS) — Last week a list was published by Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, announcing the "12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world."

It is just over 20 years since Baylor carried out a similar survey; W. Hulitt Gloer, director of Baylor's Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching, commented on the differences between the two surveys. "Of great interest," he said, "is the diversity represented in the new survey, especially with regards to ethnicity and ministry," pointing out that the new list includes three African-Americans, and is divided between eight pastors and four academics.

But as the results were publicized, social media lit up with reactions that ranged from outrage and despair, to ridicule and scorn. Like me, many people were struck forcibly by the list's *lack* of diversity.

The problem is not with the individuals named, each of whom is a distinguished preacher, and some are also leading homiletics scholars and authors. I have personally met four of them, and found them to be impressive people both in and out of the pulpit; a little online research reveals that the rest are equally outstanding. The problem, rather, is that the list as a whole creates a biased and anachronistic impression of what an effective preacher looks like.

First of all, unlike the church population as a whole, this list of preachers is predominantly white.

Secondly, although the list claims to represent "the English-speaking world," the names are drawn exclusively from the U.S.

Some critics were quick to point out that all those named are mid-to-late career, implying that young people are not effective preachers. But perhaps the most glaring anomaly of all is that, among the 12 preachers on the list, only one is a woman.

Members of "Nevertheless She Preached," a group founded to promote women in the pulpit, were among those critics. "While the survey indeed names some effective preachers, the results include only one woman, no women of color, and zero LGBTQ preachers. Yikes!" they wrote on their website, and published a list of their own.

On the face of it, then, the subtext of Baylor's list is that if you aspire to become an effective preacher, you would be best advised to be American, white and male. In a climate more attuned than ever to the need to break down the narrow confines of patriarchy, how could this study produce such a one-sided perspective?

To be fair to Baylor, their intent was not to award the "Oscars" of preaching, but to identify what constitutes excellence in preaching, and how best to improve their teaching of homiletics. The study had two stages: In 2016 a survey was carried out to update the seven criteria for effective preaching. After that, scholars and practitioners from two associations were asked to nominate the preachers who best fulfilled those criteria. Nearly 800 nominations were made, from which the final list was selected.

The criteria agreed upon were more concerned with the quality of the preacher's art than with their fame or popularity. In 2001, when Time magazine proposed that T.D. Jakes might be "the next Billy Graham," its assessment was based on the preacher's drawing power; Jakes and Graham, it said, were the only two preachers who could fill the 79,000-seat

Georgia Dome.

The Baylor survey, however, was based on such matters as the skillful and scholarly use of Scripture, the sermon's form and structure, and clarity of delivery. Its purpose, according to Gloer, was "that we may continually be becoming more effective," specifically in the task of teaching the next generation of preachers.

Nevertheless, the Baylor list does function as a kind of prize—or at least, that is how it is perceived now that it has been publicized. CNN likened it to the NBA Dream Team, the Grammys, and the Oscars, accolades that not only celebrate excellence in their field, but serve to reinforce the success of those who hold the awards and who to a certain extent set the stage for others who will follow in their footsteps.

The 12 preachers on the 1996 list were given the "Baylor Great Preachers" award, and invited to preach on campus during the following year. This clearly both celebrated and promoted the ministry of those 12 preachers, but the side effect of this kind of exercise is to create subliminal expectations for the next generation.

To present the public face of effective preaching as predominantly white, male and American is a failure in two ways. Not only does it fail to register highly effective preachers who do not conform to this identity, it also projects an image of what an effective preacher looks like. And, if you are Asian, black, Latino, or a young woman of any ethnicity, and this image overwhelmingly does not look like you, that in itself makes it harder to hear the call to the pulpit.

I question the usefulness, then, of widely publicizing a list that creates such an anachronistic picture. It may have been wiser for Baylor to keep their results in-house, to ask themselves in what ways their survey was flawed enough to produce such an unbalanced result, and to begin to address

those anomalies. As a friend of mine wrote on social media, “if you researched your list and it turned up only one woman out of twelve, you would think ‘We’d better not publish this. It’s clearly rubbish.’”

In the end, despite the merits of each individual on this list, it is hard to ignore the implication that it would be unusual for someone other than a white American male to become an outstanding preacher. And that, rather than promoting effective preaching, is more likely to prove profoundly ineffective for inspiring the next generation of preachers.

The Rev. Maggi Dawn is dean of Marquand Chapel and associate professor of theology and literature at Yale Divinity School. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard.