

Preaching to Contemporary Culture

By Mark Beeson

Every morning we wake up it's 2008. We can wish it was 1952. We may long for the good old days. But like it or not, God has ordained that our preaching will be leveraged against the needs of contemporary culture in 2008.

Can you say, "culture shock"? Get ready. I still remember the day culture shock slapped me and I never saw it coming.

I discovered my daughter using the family computer. At least, it appeared that way. She was in the chair in front of the monitor. She had one hand on the keyboard. She was looking at the screen. But something else was going on—something frightening to me. She was involved in activities—let's say "questionable" activities—and I couldn't understand how she could do such things.

She was engaged in a Google search to research a project, listening to her iPod, communicating with eleven different people by "instant message," and chatting on her cell phone. She was watching a YouTube video on a small screen in the corner of her monitor as she blogged while painting her toenails. I was shocked.

Overstimulated, as torrential streams of data poured into my head, I feared all the synapses in my brain would fire at once and I'd crumple to the floor in a heap. Trying to block out the cacophony of illustrated sound I cried out, "What *are* you doing?"

A very calm young lady looked back at me and simply responded, "Studying."

We are living and leading in a new day. Technology has changed the way we live. Technology has changed the way we communicate. Technology has changed the way we think.

The question is, "Will it change the way we preach?"

Consider some facts about contemporary life.

1. Preachers don't control the flow of information.

We live with the first generation in history with the ability to access an online universe of information without help from a mentor or teacher (not to mention a preacher). People aren't coming to church to get information; they don't need to anymore. Once upon a time, information flowed from the top down. Not anymore. Now information and opinions flow from the bottom up.

We live in a world where anyone anywhere can influence everyone everywhere. One person with a camera phone posts a video on YouTube and within hours millions of people are watching it.

A handful of network news anchors no longer own the



monopoly on truth. Bureaucrats, denominational officials, and high-profile pastors no longer control the agenda. Recognizing that normal people have access to truth and want to participate in the public debate, news bureaus ask viewers to submit *their* pictures and videos for the world to see.

Sure it's difficult to deal with new realities, but how much more challenging is fighting the fog of misinformation, confusion, and lies? People need the wisdom of God's story added to their knowledge of the facts.

Forget the old notion that we should "Unleash the laity." The laity have been "off the leash" for a long time.

2. People learn in a matrix grid of story and image.

Every year, fewer people think in linear fashion. Some still do; most do not. Mathematicians celebrate linear proofs that $2+2+2+2=8$. Lawyers cite precedent case law with a defense of linear and consequential thinking. But that's not how people learn in the public square.

Pop culture is wallpapered with video monitors and flat-panel TVs. Multiple screens and channel surfing enable us to simultaneously watch five shows. If the batteries die in the remote, we stick with one channel and watch the chaos of four people in heated debate talking over each other (which my mother always said was "rude") while the stock index scrolls along the bottom of the screen.

There may have been a day when we could speak the truth in love and buttress our apologetic with proof-texting and evidence that demands a verdict, but that day has passed. Today we

discover a longing for illustrated, incarnate understanding.

People are not coming to church to hear a line-by-line apologetic for their faith. They don't resonate with linear postulates; they long for wisdom wrapped up in stories, images, and art.

Where faith and culture collide, we stand and preach.

3. Contemporary music and artistic expressions of pop culture should be leveraged for good; arts enrich the church.

The Wesley brothers didn't use contemporary bar tunes in their worship. They were strident in their protest of alcohol consumption and devoted to personal holiness. Suggesting the Wesleys used bawdy and ribald tavern songs to enhance worship seems incongruent to their preaching. Dean McIntyre, director of music resources at the General Board of Discipleship, agrees. The Wesleys did not encourage the use of bar songs for worship. He says, "Given their aesthetic and theological sense, it would (have been) unthinkable for them to do so."¹

What many don't realize is that the Wesleys utilized a medieval form of secular ballads to engage early Methodists in song. The pattern was "bar form"—not to be confused with "bar tune," and consisted of three or more stanzas having the same rhyme scheme and the same final line of refrain.²

Here's the bottom line. The Wesleys knew the value of contemporary music and used a culturally relevant form of music and poetry to facilitate worship. Profane tavern songs (bar tunes) weren't used in worship, but the medieval form of poetic ballads (bar form) was. In fact, several songs in the United Methodist Hymnal—some of our most beloved hymns, even today—hold "bar form" characteristics, including "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." They were developed in a medieval form that included epic tales of pagan adventure and irreverent myth.

Like the Wesleys, we must redeem the arts and leverage contemporary forms of artistic expression. The style of music is not the substance, nor is the form of the lyric its text.

Faith intersects contemporary life in the arts.

4. It is up to us to discipline our lives to preach the good news in a language people understand.

Remember teaching your daughter to hit a ball with a bat? You encouraged her to lift the big red plastic bat off her shoulder. You suggested keeping her eye on the huge plastic ball. You even told her when to swing. Why? You wanted her to make contact. You stood as close as you dared and lobbed it underhand in a high, slow arc. Why didn't you fire a fast-ball? Why didn't you talk trash and brush her back from the plate? Simple. You wanted her to hit the ball.

You knew any semblance of a hit would spark a love for the game. Watching her hit the ball, you knew her joy would increase with every success. That's why you got her the biggest bat you could find and threw the easiest pitch in your repertoire. That's why you cheered and jumped and clapped when she hit the ball.

Imagine the dad who throws hard sliders at his five-year-old.

Is he trying to impress her with his prowess? Does he want her to love the game or does he cause her to despair, believing she'll never be any good? Is he superior and untouchable, or empowering and helpful?

How about us?

Are we bringing new people into church services where they can make contact? How many of us lob up a weekly service new people can follow? Look at your services. Are you lobbing it up when you preach? Are you hoping people get it? Do you want them to knock the ball out of the park, or are you hurling knuckleballs so erratic even you don't know where they're going?

People are intimidated and fearful of pastors when they are perceived as impressive and "untouchable." Paradoxically, people are impressed by God when they realize God became "touchable" through Christ. People are awed when they realize Jesus brought "up there down here."

Every pastor must decide. Do I want people impressed with Jesus or me? No one can pursue both goals. People will leave your services impressed

with Jesus or with you, connecting with the gospel or feeling confused and discouraged. Which do you want?

Tension roars at the intersection of contemporary life and faith.

There you have it—Preaching in contemporary culture is our task and our challenge is not new. In Romans 1:14-16, the Apostle Paul said, "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Some of our hearers have a well-grounded faith; some do not. But we are called to preach the gospel to all.

If people are going to live for Christ in 2008, preachers will need to face contemporary culture. We'll need to face the reality of today and address the real issues real people face in real life.

Doing all the good we can requires courageous resolve. There is immediacy to our work. Wesley said, "In order to this, redeem the time. Improve the present moment. Buy up every opportunity of growing in grace, or of doing good. Let not the thought of receiving more grace tomorrow make you negligent of today."³

Therein lies the hope for people. Every morning we wake up at the intersection of faith and contemporary life, and we offer them Christ. □



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¹ <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=705>

² <http://www.britannica.com/eb/topic-509088/rondeau>. Explaining the development of Medieval Secular Music, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* clarifies evolution of poetic form and function.

³ <http://www.wbbm.org/john-wesley-sermons/serm-042.htm>