

What's In(*novative*) with Preaching?

Revolutionary Innovations in Proclaiming Truth

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by Marcus Bieschke

Do you think Jesus would like Starbucks? Wireless Internet for his laptop-blogging pleasure . . . the jazz music setting an artistic, interactive mood . . . stories being spun and told all around Him . . . I think He'd love it. But what do blogs, jazz and story-telling have to do with Jesus and preaching today? Tons. These symbols represent recent revolutionary innovations in proclaiming Truth to a postmodern world. Look closely within the emerging church and you'll see how they fit in with today's design of preaching.

Preachi(nترنت)ng: Web-Surfing on a Laptop Pulpit

Think preaching has to happen in a sanctuary? Think again. With the Internet, faith-stimulating, life-changing preaching is virtually boundaryless. According to George Barna, 85 percent of users (or "screenagers") go online for spiritual purposes. Not only is Christ being proclaimed in emails and chat rooms, but cyber-preaching has now ventured into the terra nova of the blogosphere. This radically expands the potential audience, taking the spiritual dialogue to the global village!

Blogging is the latest innovation of our hyper-connected digital culture where millions of "bloggers" are interacting with one another over any issue—very often spiritual ones. The unofficial historian of the blogging movement, Hugh Hewitt, says blogging is the most radical revolution in communication technology since the invention of the printing press. And, since blogging draws people into a world of ideas and dialogues, Christ-following bloggers who seize this communication innovation are igniting enormous global spiritual impact—the biggest since the Protestant Reformation.

Brian McLaren's book, *More Ready than You Realize* (2002) shares the tale of a redemptive e-relationship with a seeker who embraced email to engage in a spiritual dialogue at her own pace and with a safe sense of anonymity. Their conversation foreshadowed the power of blogging. It seems that God has gone and blended the techno-savvy generations of the emerging church with a world hungry for relationships and community, making the Internet the primary pulpit of the digital age. Sure, cyberspace is not always the safest place for the soul (indeed, in many ways it can be the techno personification of depravity). But what an incarnational thrill to sprinkle virtual salt and light – to be a cyber city on a hill!

I've just begun to experiment with downloading the power of cyber-spirituality into my Sunday morning sermons. I invite our congregation to interact with a blog I post about an upcoming sermon topic. It's a way for me to get a more accurate pulse of where folks are. And this empowers them to influence or shape a sermon even before I preach it. Instead of me telling them where or how something applies, they tell me. Harnessing technology like blogging increases the relevance and proactive listening of and participation in my sermons.

Jesus—who used every available means to get a point across—would have been a blogmeister.

P(articipational)reaching: Decentralized Sermonators

And then there's the jazz element within today's preaching innovations. Jazz bands vary from orchestras, in that jazz enjoys shared leadership to create music – it's improvisational. In orchestras, the conductor leads the musicians in where they're going and how they'll get there. The song is predetermined. Well, the sun is setting on the modern era's orchestral style of preaching. Today, we're moving from one man's directive argument to an interactive, shared conversation between pastor and pew-riders.

This is significant since postmoderns usually won't give their undivided attention to anything that isn't interactive. That's why, in his ground-breaking book *The Millennium Matrix*, M. Rex Miller advocates creating collaborative learning communities where preaching is a collective experience with multiple participants, moving the emphasis from the individual to the community. Forget about the individualistic "how I can live my life better." Build on the collective, tribal sense of "how we can make a redemptive, incarnational, Kingdom-building difference in our world together."

Need some ideas on how to engage more congregational participation in your preaching? Start by not hogging the pulpit! Open up the floor to reactions and examples. Give people an outlet for discussion. Ask them questions. Or show real courage and let them ask you questions. Allow opportunities for dialogue between different perspectives. Len Sweet (2000), longtime guru of the postmodern beast, calls this kind of "talk show host" style of participational preaching "Karaoke Preaching"—where the preacher wades out into the congregation a-la-Jerry Springer (sorry) and builds a sermon as he shares the MIC with participants and their ideas, questions and objections.

Another jazzy way to preach comes from Spencer Burke, a prophet of the emerging church movement and founder of TheOoze.com. Pick a topic and four people from different backgrounds or cultures. Get together a few times at Starbucks to talk about the issue over a latte. Then, on Sunday morning, do it again, only this time, do it in front of your congregation. "You get the improvisation of a jazz quartet, where each player knows what the other will do, supporting the other in order to create something. It is like a panel discussion except the point isn't to win an argument, but to make something beautiful together" (Burke, 2003, p.58).

A friend of mine is planting a postmodern church in Brussels. In a recent interactive gathering, the group wrote a poem together about what the church really is and really isn't. Get it? They actually created a piece of collective art! Interestingly, they then blogged their poem to generate more feedback from the global community (<http://www.dealministry.com/blog/2005/02/when-we-say-church.html>).

Whatever participational preaching method you choose, in addition to creating a sense of communal unity and shared experience, you'll also dramatically enhance the learning process. How many times can you recall when Jesus involved his listeners in connecting the spiritual dots?

Pre(*xperiential*)aching: Sensible Story-Sermons

- When you preached your last sermon, did anyone experience God or did they just learn something about Him? Is it time to innovate? Len Sweet (2000) shares that "New World preachers don't write sermons; they create total experiences" (p.43). Postmoderns are some of the most "Pauline" people you'll ever know. Paul modeled a passion to "experientially know Christ and the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10). Postmodern people are returning to those experience-driven roots. Apply that to preaching. To borrow from McLaren, get out of the passé paradigm of preaching sermons that simply transfer information. Instead, get into the flow of preaching that inspires transformation. The new paradigm stresses apprehension over comprehension, sense over sensibility, dialogue over monologue, image over word and story over lecture.

In a recent message, I told Jesus' story while showing portraits of Christ over the ages: His enfleshment into a global culture of brokenness; His anointing with the Spirit; His passionate, God-given, fire-in-the-bones mission to bring healing. Then I turned a corner and explained another priceless portrait of Christ (that was actually sitting on an easel draped in black) which portrays the same elements of earth (incarnation into brokenness), wind (Spirit-empowering) and fire (passion to bring healing). Having engaged the participants' image-driven curiosity to the point of climax, I ripped the veil from this priceless portrait of Christ to reveal . . . a mirror.

Looking into that mirror we saw another authentic portrait of Christ. We talked about how, as the Body of Christ, we are His continued incarnation (1 Co. 12:27). We share his ground-zero—the earth (Mt. 28:18-20), His wind—the Holy Spirit’s power (Acts 1:8) and His fiery passion to heal (Jn. 20:21). That story, that image sent us out with our shirttails on fire!

Mark Miller, founder of the experiential retreat for postmodern sojourners called “The Jesus Journey,” describes this dynamic in his book, *Experiential Storytelling*. He paints it as the sacred interplay between surroundings, symbols and participants. When the audience looked into the mirror and saw themselves, their imaginations were officially abducted to join the shared spiritual journey, to be immersed in an ocean of communal experience as God’s people in God’s great story. That’s what the innovative preacher does in creating stories that are not just heard, but experienced—and not just experienced, but experienced in community.

Preachers who experiment with this innovation do two things. First, they engage as many senses as possible to not only abduct participants, but apprehend them. And isn’t that what Jesus did when he captured the essence of His sacrificial death through the senses of seeing, smelling, touching and tasting of bread and wine at the Last Supper (Mt. 26:26-28)?

Second, they tell stories that stand alone and convey transcendent and epic themes—very much like Jesus’ style of telling parables (i.e., the Prodigal Son or the Rich Man and Lazarus of Luke 17). In these stories, meaning or even application may not be obvious. This marks a departure from the usual neatly packaged, obvious outcome illustrations of the enlightenment culture where everything had to “make sense.” Experiential stories are subtle, intriguing and mysterious and are open to interpretation allowing participants to think for themselves rather than spelling out every detail or connection for them.

So, what’s in with preaching to our postmodern world?

Harnessing the Internet to connect spiritually anytime, anyplace. Why not post a blog today?

Inviting participation to create a shared adventure. How about some jazz in this week’s sermon?

Experimenting with experiential storytelling. Are you brave enough to abduct your audience?

Maybe the best way to awaken your innovative adventure in Truth proclamation would be to sip on a venti cup of Christ, the postmodern culture and some spiritual caffeine. So grab your laptop and your scriptures. I’ll meet you at Starbucks.

About the Author

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