

“Woo me, sister; move me, brother!”  
What does Pop Culture Have to  
Do with Preaching?

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It’s about time! Let me know when it’s out!” It’s been a common reaction, from U2 fans and preachers alike, to the announcement of this book. A very different reaction has also been common: a perplexed frown, an uncomfortable laugh, a look of blank incomprehension. “Preaching U2? What do you mean?”

While some people have no doubt about the wisdom of placing U2 and faith side by side, for others it is a struggle. What has U2 got to do with religion? What has popular culture got to do with the gospel?

In a culture where religion belongs to the private world and pop culture to the public, we have tended to think of religion and pop culture as two areas divided by a vast chasm. On the one side, fans fear contamination of their life-giving pop culture with life-denying pulpit prognostications; on the other, preachers hark back with puritanical disapproval to the excesses of “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll,” the music of the devil.

But in spite of our mutual suspicions, the reality is that religion and pop culture have always been connected. In the medieval peri-

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od, mystery plays and their accompanying, and often bawdy, music taught the great themes of Christian theology to the uneducated; in the sixteenth century, hymn tunes were derived from tavern songs. Even in the twentieth century, faith has frequently found expression, or at least come under examination, in popular music, whether in the influence of gospel music on jazz and blues or the explicit questioning of a song like Joan Osborne's "One of Us." And we have also seen the rise of a whole new genre of "Christian music," along with the proliferation of multi-media worship experiences.

And so the relationships between religion and pop culture have tended to take one of two paths—mutual abhorrence (as described above) or unconditional appropriation (borrowing the trappings of religion for a multi-media "spiritual" effect, or trying to add the beats of pop music to Christian hymns "to attract the young people"). However, neither of these responses does full justice to the integral and substantial relationship between religion and culture.

The twentieth century saw a huge shift in the place of Christianity in the world. In 1900, the balance of power was held by the Christian capitalist west, the so-called "first world." Colonialism and Christianity went hand in hand, and there was a more or less unified Christian world view. A hundred years later, the scene had changed dramatically. The dramatic growth of the Christian community in Latin and South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, and a parallel shrinking of Christian influence in the former colonial powers, changed the balance of power. While the content of the gospel remained constant (albeit with greater attention to issues of justice), its expression varied across different cultures. We began to recognize pluralism in world views, even among Christians, and it became impossible to ignore the reality of religion and culture influencing one another.<sup>1</sup>

Religion looks different in different places and cultures. Geography can shape theology. If you grow up in northern Europe, where Christmas falls in the dead of winter, Christ the light of the world has different associations attached to it than it does in Australia, where Christmas is accompanied by the fierce summer sun.

Likewise, the prophecy of Amos, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteous-

ness like an ever-flowing stream”(5:21, 23–24) carries a myriad of different associations if it is read in Westminster Abbey, than if read in the refugee camps of Jenin or the Gaza strip.

The story from Acts 2 of the new Christians selling what they have and holding all in common is regarded as challenging at the least, or plain unrealistic, in New York City; in a culture where the primary unit is the village, rather than the individual, or in a monastery, it has a ring of authenticity.

And Paul’s admonition to women to cover their heads when prophesying might well be liberating to a woman who has grown up wearing the veil in Afghanistan because it gives her permission to prophesy; but outrageous to a graduate of Vassar<sup>2</sup> who cannot imagine any restriction on her speech.

The examples are endless. But what is common to all is the way in which religion and culture influence one another. However, that relationship is rarely made explicit. We tend to assume that the way we understand and do things is universal, that everyone is like that. We are all too often unaware of the ways in which our own geographical and cultural contexts, and, indeed, our own histories, shape the way we do faith.

But the influence is not just in one direction. Culture critiques and shapes faith; faith critiques and shapes culture. The relationship is dialectical—as we pay attention to a specific instance of the influence of culture on faith, we become aware of where that influence has itself been shaped by faith, and so on, in a never-ending dance.

And this happens not so much on a formal level, in the councils of the church, but on an informal level, in the lives and communities of the faithful, from which it trickles up to the structures. People grab hold of their culture in one hand and their religion in the other, and then try to work out how it is that they can not only co-exist, but be in harmony. They ask questions and forge answers, they look for places of genuine coherence, for authentic emotion, for congruity with experience. Both culture and religion tap into the very essence of who we are; they are the building blocks of our identity. It is no wonder, then, that they are integrally and substantially related.

And that is particularly true of the relationship between pop culture, as expressed in music, and Christian faith. Theologian Robert Schreier suggests that “the poet, the prophet, the teacher . . . may be among those who give leadership to the actual shaping into words of the response of faith.”<sup>3</sup> It is here that U2 belongs,

along with the many preachers who have heard U2's work and struggled to give voice to the theologies which emerge from its interaction with the sacred. They give voice not only to their own longings and hopes, but to those of our culture alongside those of our tradition—so that we learn to speak a truly colloquial language of faith.



I still remember one of my first preaching classes in seminary. We sat in the classroom and used our fingers to count off a simple five-step model for preaching. State the point, explain the point, illustrate the point, apply the point, and finally, restate the point. Thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, pinkie. Do this three times over, add an introduction and conclusion, and “Voilà!” You have a sermon.

But, of course, the whole process was based on a fallacy. A number of fallacies, actually. First of all, that preaching is a fundamentally propositional activity. Preaching is an expression of the word of God; it is one means by which God speaks to us here in the twenty-first century. And if the words of God in scripture are anything to go by, God is not limited to talking in propositions. God tells stories, God laments, God comforts, God celebrates. A robust understanding of preaching as the word of God means that we will not be content to talk in our sermons about God as if God were some abstract entity, but that we will strive to create a space in which God's very self can be heard, felt, experienced.

The second fallacy, evident from the separation of proposition/explanation and illustration/application, is that interpretation of the biblical text can be done in isolation from real life. The notion that one can, through study, prayer, or whatever, somehow objectively discern some idealized notion of truth is akin to doing surgery in a sterile environment without a patient—it defeats its very purpose. The problems raised are both theological and philosophical.

Theologically speaking, as Christians we worship an incarnate God. God is neither an abstract principle nor a disembodied spir-

it. The uniqueness of our spiritual tradition is that we follow a God who became flesh and lived among us. This is a God who ate, slept, cried—and died—and in resurrection brought new life to us all. Christ did not simply preach the gospel; he was the gospel, the good news of God, who brought in his body wisdom and healing and forgiveness. His incarnation becomes the model for our life of faith—not some disembodied spirituality, but a gritty engagement with an embodied world in and through which God speaks. Our preaching must exhibit that same engagement if it is to become a vehicle of the gospel, a vehicle of the grace of God. Christ is God “with skin”—and any attempt to preach “without skin,” without an incarnational praxis, is to deny in ourselves the very thing God did in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Philosophically speaking, what postmodernism has brought to light is that while objective truth may exist, we as human beings can only know it subjectively. This is a radical departure from previous notions of truth and of authority.<sup>5</sup> In premodern societies, the world was conceived of as a relational body, the basic unit being the community. The preacher embodied the community, and preached an authoritative and reliable corporate truth. In modernism, truth was determined not by its speaker, but by its correspondence with empirical observation. It was subject to the rules of logic, objective, abstract, and universally valid. The preacher functioned as an objective observer who could in turn identify objective truth.

But postmodernism has undermined both premodernism and modernism. It identifies truth that might potentially exist, but which cannot be accessed directly and without mediation. All perception involves interpretation, and hence any truth is an interpreted truth, reflecting the lenses of our experience. So it is a mistake to assume that we as preachers can somehow access some objective theological truth, unshaped by our experience, and then convey it to others who will receive it objectively. We are all shaped by our culture and experiences; they make us truly human. Truth always comes to us in a particular (rather than universal) form, and is always in conversation with the world around us. Postmodernism is distrustful of claims of objectivity and of abstraction from life.

And so, from a postmodern perspective, it is impossible to interpret Scripture in isolation from real life. Our culture and experience will always be present and influential.

The reality is that this is nothing new. In preaching, we have always had multiple influences. In the past, we have tended to label them as “illustrations” or “the use of experience in preaching,” but

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anyone who has ever tried to write a sermon with an “illustration” already ringing in their ears knows how that illustration shapes our reading from the very beginning of our work. The Christmas gospels always come to us laden with Christmas carols; I cannot read the Easter gospels without thinking of a friend who died one Easter morning, her last words “Christ is risen indeed.” Similarly, we cannot look at our legal code without hearing echoes of the Ten Commandments; we cannot hear Shakespeare without noticing allusions to Scripture.

From a theoretical perspective, this mutual influence is called “intertextuality.” Broadly simplified, this is the idea that every human utterance (or “text”) is drawn from numerous other texts. Nothing we say is entirely new, nor is it entirely objective: It is all the result of the collision and influence of everything we have ever heard, read, and experienced. Every text is a mosaic or tissue of quotations.<sup>6</sup> Some of these influences are subtle, barely noticeable; others are strong, demanding our attention.

In terms of preaching, what this means is that alongside the biblical text are a whole bunch of other texts vying for our attention. They come from our family histories, our reading, the media, the world around us. They spill over into the biblical text, shape how we read it, and the text in turn shapes how they are understood to be meaningful. And then the whole muddle somehow (though hard work and the intervention of the Holy Spirit) coalesces into a new text, the one we call a sermon.

So when it comes to preaching, to follow a simple interpretation-illustration-application model is to ignore the riches of this intertextual web, and to make instead relatively superficial connections between text and some hypothetical lived experience. By contrast, to preach intertextually is to draw into prominence particular dimensions of the already existing web, and to make explicit the meaning-making connections, enabling others to search their own lives to do the same. It is the difference between play-acting and actually living.

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In this book, we have raised to prominence one dimension of the intertextual web, that is, the relationship between faith and pop culture, and more specifically, preaching and the work of the band U2. In some sermons, we see how the music of U2 has profoundly shaped a reading of the biblical text. From the moment I

first heard “Beautiful Day,” I couldn’t wait to preach on Noah. The two lines that allude to the Noah narrative demanded that I preach not on a narrow, individualistic notion of human sin, but on global issues of destruction and hope. For Jay Lawlor, Brian Walsh, and Jamie Howison, U2’s music inspires a reading of the lament Psalms which draws out of them contemporary challenges to Pollyanna piety, to the church’s worship, and to our complicity in injustice.

In other sermons, it is the Biblical text which has shaped the meanings found in U2’s lyrics. Wade Hodges finds the grace that makes beauty in God’s shout of blessing from the cross. Leslie Reinke sees the transformative power of Christ echoed in “Gone.” And the Playboy Mansion becomes a shadow of the heavenly mansions of John 14 in Derek Walmsley’s sermon.

And in still other sermons, the relationship is more subtle—U2 and the biblical text combine to call forth new meanings, new readings of other texts. From the doubt of “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” and the risk-filled action of Mary anointing Jesus emerges a new voice of faithful hope in Anna Carter Florence’s sermon; for Henry VanderSpek, a visit to Deathclock.com pulls into view scripture after scripture and song after song, conspiring together to create a fragrant life from the fear of death.

This is no superficial borrowing from popular culture to attract or appease “the kids,” nor is it a jettisoning of biblical tradition for the same purpose. Rather, it is a bringing into view the rich theological reflection which surrounds pop culture, a raising up of the meaning-making process that is constantly occurring as we engage in life and work out our faith.

So how do we do it? What steps can a preacher take to prepare a sermon that is richly intertextual and draws appropriately on popular culture alongside scripture?

First, listen. Listen prayerfully to the world around you. Saturate yourself in the articulations of our culture, whether in music, art, film, or TV. Be attentive to connections and allusions, both explicit and implicit. Wonder whether Tyne Daly’s character cutting her hair at the end of an episode of *Judging Amy* has anything to do with biblical patterns of mourning. Find out what Martin Sheen’s President Bartlet is saying when he rails at God in a darkened National Cathedral. Hunt out biblical allusions in the speeches of our politicians and military leaders. Read poetry, and look for the depths of human experience. Turn on the radio or VH-1, and hear what is heard by hundreds of thousands of people. Pay attention

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to where God might be active.

Listen prayerfully to your self. Allow your mind to wander, and keep track of its wanderings. Take note of the songs you just can't get out of your head, the images seared on your mind.

Listen prayerfully to the text. Read it, first, not for understanding but for God's word to you. Just as the body of a beloved one becomes a cadaver under the scalpel of a forensic pathologist, so too God's words can become devoid of life if we only approach them with an exegetical scalpel. When you approach the biblical text, bring your other listenings with you. Don't shut them out of the process of interpretation, but be aware of how they influence your reactions to the text, how they push you in one direction rather than another. In the beginning, this process of listening is something we need to do consciously. Over time, as the habit of listening becomes ingrained, it will occur naturally.

And then, as you begin your exegetical work, keep all those listenings in mind. Write down the connections, the obscure things which leap to mind as you read commentaries, as you struggle with the Greek and Hebrew. Don't worry if your page becomes filled with random jottings and lines cutting across each other. Just let it fill up with the intersections, the allusions, the bare threads of connection.

When it comes time to write the sermon, you will not need to hunt for illustrations on the Internet or conjure stories from thin air. It will all be there for you in that intertextual web. Pick up one thread, follow it carefully, and there you will find your sermon. And above all trust. Trust that your mind will do its work, and the Holy Spirit of God will do no less.

Does pop culture have anything to do with preaching? Absolutely! It expresses the longings, the doubts, the hopes, and the celebrations of the human spirit, the very same longings, doubts, hopes, and celebrations that are woven into Christian spirituality. Pop culture challenges religious practice, while simultaneously drawing upon the wealth of spiritual tradition. And it is a rich contributor to the incarnational "stuff" that sets preaching apart from learned lectures about abstract belief systems, that points us to a living, active God.



So in the words of U2's "Mofo," then, "Woo me, sister / Move me, brother"; preach the gospel of a God who lived and died among us and who dares to keep speaking the language of incarnate being, the language of love.

