Navigating with a new map
Preaching for youth and young adults

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Sociologists, historians, and theologians suggest that we are living in the midst of a paradigm shift. Youth, they say, inhabit a world different from that of their parents; the way this generation views reality differs from their elders' experience of the world.

If it is true that youth comprehend the world in a new way, it stands to reason that preaching for youth must respond to this difference. The destination is the same: our goal continues to be preaching that has biblical integrity, that facilitates Spirit transformation. But we must get there using a new map. We must use a new structure and preach in a more participatory fashion. If we want to facilitate biblical understanding and nurture young disciples, our preaching must invite listeners to use not just the left but also the right hemisphere of their brain.

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Seeing a new landscape

While many factors contribute to the new way youth comprehend reality, the factor that most affects the art of preaching is the change in thinking that electronic culture has brought to our society. It has created a new landscape for us. Like all media, electronic communication technology doesn't just transmit a message; in a vital way, it becomes the message.[1]

No medium is neutral—not television, computers, movies, radio, or the World Wide Web. We have moved from a predominately print-oriented culture to a culture where electronic media dominate. According to a recent study by the American Heart Association, 31 percent of youth spend thirty hours a week on the Internet.[2] Youth are particularly vulnerable to the disadvantages of this paradigm shift, because they have not learned the thinking patterns characteristic of print culture. The primary problem is

not the content, the sex and violence regularly shown over the airwaves notwithstanding. Even electronic media with good content change how we think.[3]

The very medium of print culture—the sequential lines of letters and spaces—has a profound impact on the gospel message. Print culture nurtures an individualistic, logical, abstract, objective world: A leads to B. In a print-dominated culture, we build knowledge on settled foundations of truth. We think about dense theological concepts, and we regard emotion with suspicion.

Preaching in a print-dominated culture typically has three points. The sermon, often read, includes complex theological analysis and moves sequentially. The Spirit transforms and conversion happens through logic and persuasion. In short, print culture uses the left hemisphere of our brain, the part of our brain that does critical thinking, makes categories, and figures out cause and effect. In a left brain encounter with God, we process abstract propositions and come to logical conclusions.

This approach has strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side, the abstract thinking characteristic of the print world helps us understand and appreciate complex aspects of the biblical world and our relationship with God. Yet we have neglected whole dimensions of the gospel by overemphasizing cognitive transformation and minimizing mystery and feeling.

In electronic culture, too, the medium is the message. The front page of a Web-based newspaper displays a jumble of unrelated headlines, most accompanied by illustrative photos. In this format, we read snippets of several articles and then click a button if we want more depth. TV ads, moving at lightning speed, use subtle visual tricks to get us to buy things. Sitcoms solve two different problems in less than half an hour. Camera shots of Katrina stir our emotions, but then the next image demands our attention, and we move on emotionally.

With its emphasis on the visual and the experiential, electronic culture nurtures the right hemisphere of the brain. Similarly, in a right brain encounter with God, mystery and feelings preside. We experience God instead of thinking about God. This culture fosters corporate approaches to faith and a reliance on intuition.

We can identify advantages and disadvantages in this world, too. Taken to its extreme, electronic culture points us toward

relativism. It weakens our capacity for abstract thought and critical reasoning. But in activating an important part of the brain, it enlivens the very parts of the gospel the print culture of modernity allowed to atrophy. We think more about concrete realities; we embrace mystery and feeling. The Gospel narratives, in recounting central stories of our faith, are better understood in an image-based culture than in a print culture. Electronic culture in many ways mirrors the first century and brings back elements of faith the modern world has neglected or suppressed.

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Moving between hemispheres

Our desire to share the gospel with youth should not lead us to try to shield them from electronic culture. In many ways, that culture is a gift to the church. But if we remain unaware of or naïve about the effects of the digital culture on the thinking of those who are immersed in it, we may undo the wonderful gifts of the print culture, especially our ability to appropriately comprehend the medium of scripture. An overemphasis on either hemisphere of the brain takes us into dangerous territory. So the very gift of the electronic culture is also its greatest danger.

Those who take on the high calling of preaching for youth in the digital age must do two things: meet youth where they are and preach the word with integrity. This happens when we preachers, acknowledging the dominance of right brain thinking, begin in that hemisphere and then move to the left hemisphere, always working toward the goal of equilibrium.

Trying a new road map

One of the best ways to move toward these two goals comes from Eugene Lowry's sermon structure, as illustrated in *The Homiletical Plot*.[4] The structure of Lowry's "loop" does two things well: it produces sermons that feel authentic to a postmodern audience, and—because it builds tension and paints word pictures in our minds—it begins with the right brain and then opens the door to the left.

My introduction to Eugene Lowry's sermon structure in June Alliman Yoder's preaching class at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary was love at first sight. I had come to seminary from a youth ministry background, so I had firsthand experience of the wandering eyes of the senior high students, the squirming of the junior high kids—the yawns, the glances at the clock. I had done everything my college speech teacher advised: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them. I peppered my three-point sermon with juicy illustrations that brought the point home, and I gestured wildly. I found their lack of engagement perplexing.

But Lowry—and June—helped me see other ways to structure a sermon. They showed me that the familiar structure—linear, logical, and sequential—relies heavily on a print culture. But my fellow worshipers live in an electronic culture, and they need something different. They need story.

Every good story, whether in the form of a movie or a Jesus parable, has a problem. In the digital age, the key to building interest is to find that problem. Even Paul, who wrote in logical, sequential ways, had a story, a narrative problem underneath the dense theology. Our job, if we want to connect with youth, is to find that story. This is the way we engage the right brain. And Lowry's loop is our guide.

Lowry's structure features five steps: Oops! (upsetting the equilibrium); Ugh! (analyzing the discrepancy); Aha! (disclosing the clue to resolution); Whee! (experiencing the gospel); and Yeah! (anticipating the consequences). The first three steps are the most important steps in the goal of beginning in the right hemisphere and moving into the left. All the steps work like a good story. The first step introduces the problem right away. Like many movies that upset the fruit basket even while the opening credits are running, the Oops! throws the audience a curve. The goal of this strategy is not simply to wake up the group with a good introduction (that's as superficial as icing on a cake), but to make them see that this story (if we're in the Gospels) or this theological discussion (think Paul) happens in real life. And real life features turmoil. The second step—Ugh!—discusses the problem. As in a good play or movie, the tension heightens, and every passing minute makes resolution seem more unlikely.

Both steps contribute to a sense of authenticity, a high value for postmodern youth. When the preacher discusses in an honest way the problem a passage presents—"This Sermon on the Mount ethic is impossible to follow"—youth are able to identify, because they probably have similar thoughts. They wonder why Jesus said he came only to save Israel, or why he told the disciples to eat his flesh, or why the woman tried to touch the hem of his coat. That's crazy talk. Youth also find it refreshing (and want to hear more) when the problem of the story is the preacher's own doubt.

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At the Charlotte assembly of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA in 2005, I admitted that I hate the story of Acts 3:1–10. In the Ugh! part of the sermon, I offered several reasons for that dislike, but the clincher was that the story makes me look bad. I can't heal people, and I don't have the faith to tell someone who is lame to stand up and walk. Instead of tiptoeing around the issue or making the healing a spiritual metaphor, I looked squarely at a problem—me. It's a gift of grace to admit the problems of passages, and youth need that grace. Adults do, too.

Step three, the Aha! moment, also works on us the way a good movie does. When the situation seems most grim, Surprise! What looked bad is really good. In my Acts 3 sermon I discover, along with those listening, that I'm not Peter and John; I'm the beggar! Jesus used a variation on the Aha! moment when he told parables. Those listening thought they knew what was going to happen, and then Jesus caught them by surprise: the bad guy, the Samaritan, is the hero! Many Bible stories have this element of ironic reversal: our very gospel of grace seems upside down in the world's value system. The foolishness of the gospel about which Paul wrote is the paradox postmodern youth want to hear. Our job is to find this twist and use it.

All of Lowry's steps, except the first one, can be an entry into the left hemisphere. I strive to enter the realm of critical analysis as early as possible, with step two. If we have hooked our listeners in spelling out the apparently impossible dilemma, and if we work

at heightening the tension in step two, then we are free to expound with details on the cultural-historical background and delve into difficult theological questions in all the steps.

We need to dispel the myth that youth and young adults can't listen to long and complicated sermons; they have a remarkable capacity for doing so. They get bored not because a sermon is too complicated but because most print-culture sermons are too obvious. The worst thing we can do is give the thesis away (tell them what we're going to tell them) in the introductory paragraph. Then they think, why should I bother listening to the rest of the sermon?

As we engage our listeners, starting with the right brains and then skillfully moving them to deep analysis in their left brains, we travel a new road that helps bring transformation.

Another misconception is that youth and young adults like sermon illustrations, and while illustrations do add color, they do not create a singular story in the worshiper's mind, which is Lowry's goal. When I use this structure, my sermon has a single point that I give away at step three, and then only after a long step-two process. As listeners struggle with the discrepancy of the original story, I avoid disrupting their musings with a different, modern-day illustration. Done right, a sermon using this structure is interactive and should not be interrupted. Done right, it will enable congregants see the biblical story play out in their minds.

Traveling together

Lowry's loop is only one structure for preaching that engages both sides of the brain. Like all sermon patterns, it can be overdone and become monotonous.

Another helpful way to engage youth and young adults is to build interactive participation—traveling together—into the sermon itself. Preachers can encourage participation in several ways. Speaking extemporaneously rather than reading a sermon is a huge step toward enhancing our listeners' engagement. Freed from a script, we communicate authenticity. Even though the sermon is memorized, we are speaking directly to the audience, and we may even say something new, something more pertinent than the words in our script. We also create an element of surprise. Preaching without a script is like walking a tightrope

without a safety net, and the congregation senses that. And the youth appreciate the risk we take.

Another way to promote participation is to ask for response, either during the sermon or after it. If we ask people to text their responses to a cell phone number, the person receiving the text messages can pass along the collected feedback, even in the middle of a sermon. Encouraging cell phone use during worship has its downside, but it does communicate to youth that we care what they think.[5] In a sermon, the primary medium is the preacher. And the medium is the message.

This new kind of preaching, a preaching that engages both sides of the brain, appeals not only to youth and young adults but also to older adults. Everyone benefits from encountering the gospel from several angles. Of course, it's the Spirit's work to transform people. But we as pastors are called to aid that process as best we can. As we work to engage our listeners of all ages, starting with the right brain and then skillfully moving them to deep analysis in their left brain, we travel a new road. And we will find our new route helps bring transformation.

Notes

[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7. See also Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29–32.

[2] Labspaces.net, http://www.labspaces.net/view_news_comments; and American Heart Association: http://www.americanheart.org/ Both Web sites indicate that 52 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls reported average total screen-time levels above 42 hours per week; 52 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls reported average levels of TV/video use above 23 hours per week; and 24 percent of boys and 7 percent of girls reported average levels of computer/internet use of almost 30 hours per week.

[3] Hipps, *The Hidden Power,* 75.

[4] Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form,* expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

[5] Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 36.

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