

Emergent church signals change in preaching, not just music, speakers say_110104

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By Craig Bird

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WACO—Maybe the pulpit is a safe-house in the worship wars—at least for now.

In the past half-century, evangelical worship has seen a lot of changes. Music styles have morphed, orders of service have flip-flopped, chalk talks gave way to PowerPoint presentations and pew Bibles and fill-in-the-blank sermon outline forms have appeared. In some cases, the lectern has disappeared, and the speaker has “dressed down.”

But overwhelmingly, the preacher still delivers a 20- to 30-minute uninterrupted soliloquy, most often with three points. It's a lecture format, intended to inform and inspire.

However, in the postmodern-influenced emergent church—which the New York Times has called the possible “next big wave of evangelical

worship”—even sermons could be changing.

Chris Seay,
pastor of
Ecclesia in
Houston and a
frequent
commentator
on
postmodernism
and religion on
national
television,
preaches
during the
closing session
of the Hearn
symposium at
Baylor
University.

“I don't think we will have master orators much longer,” predicted Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia in Houston and a frequent commentator on postmodern culture. “Art, dance and music are new forces that will play increasingly larger roles” if the church is to be relevant to the Millennials, today's teens and young adults.

The postmodern person “celebrates experiences” and wants to “engage all the senses,” he explained. “They have shorter attention spans, and they process information differently from earlier generations. They learn through narrative—stories—and the visual is very important.”

Pastor/author Brian McLaren agreed. "We're facing a transition from the familiar/normal to something less formal. Songwriters and music publishers play important roles in the theological formation of a congregation—even more than the pastor. I'm pretty sure people don't catch themselves humming the sermon during the week."

Two other strong emphases in postmodern Christian worship—the desire for community and the desire for contemplation—also are apt to influence the preaching, several session leaders at Baylor University's "Music and Worship in an Emerging Culture" symposium agreed.

"For a long time, church has been a place to go—but you could go and sit in the same seat for years and never know the person who sat in front of you," said Sally Morgenthaler, author and founder of Sacra-mentis.com. "But this generation wants to be connected, to each other and to God. The preaching experiences will need to contribute to that by being about worship instead of evangelism. The gathered church worships. The scattered church is involved with its community and showing what it means to be a Christ follower."

Contemplation and meditation may invade the sermon. "I'm convinced that sermons need intentional silences in them," said Hulitt Gloer, professor of preaching and Christian Scripture at Baylor's Truett Seminary. "I need to invite people not just to listen to what I say but to what God is saying. It's a radical idea to listen more than we speak so they (the congregation) will know they are to be actively engaged."

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If the emergent church model is accepted, preaching will shift from the linear style to the storyteller-like Jesus, who spoke in parables.

"I pretty much preach one-point sermons," said Louie Giglio, director of Choice Resources. "My goal is to give them one image to take away with them that will help them live their life the rest of the week. And it's all about story, inviting them into God's story, telling about others who joined God's story. They aren't hungry for information—they hunger to know that there is a God who loves them."

The perception of pastors also will change as the role shifts from spiritual example to a fellow traveler. "I think of it as all of us going into a cave together and sharing what we've discovered with our pickaxes," said Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco. "It's not like where you tie a Scripture to a chair and beat it with a rubber hose for 20 minutes to see what you can get out of it."

The foundation of community also allows the pastor to speak the uncomfortable prophetic word.

"We have to be double agents, amphibians who are loyal to our community but also willing, when necessary, to turn on our community when it needs to be challenged. Promoting community and harmony can't keep us from saying the hard things that need to be said," McLaren said.

But those hard things will have a fair hearing "if we've held their hands in the hospital and been with them through hard times as well as good times," Pennington-Russell added.

Absolute honesty also makes people more willing to hear the hard things," Seay argued. "We do a disservice to the gospel when we make the people in the Bible out to be better than they were and we pretend to be better than we are," he explained.

"If we're honest about Abraham pimping his wife-and teaching his son to do the same thing-then the person sitting in the pew can realize, 'Hey, I'm not as bad as Abraham, so maybe God really can love me.' If he knows his pastor uses non-theological language when he stubs his toe-but still keeps trying to follow God, then he will understand he can too-even when it's hard."

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.