

# Christians challenged to find meaning in popular culture

November 25, 2011

TYLER—Christians should engage popular culture rather than fear it, participants at a conference on "The Gospel According to Pixar" learned at [Green Acres Baptist Church](#) in Tyler.

Christians should examine popular culture—even Pixar movies like Toy Story and Finding Nemo—to discover points of connection with non-Christians, said David Zahl, founding executive director of Mockingbird Ministries, during a conference at Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler.  
(PIXAR STUDIOS IMAGE)

The conference drew its name from the title of a book by featured speaker David Zahl, college and young adult minister at Christ Episcopal Church in Charlottesville, Va. Zahl also is founding executive director of [Mockingbird Ministries](#), an organization "devoted to connecting the Christian faith with the realities of everyday life."

When he served as a youth minister, Zahl said, teens often asked what sort of music they should listen to and what movies they should watch. Their intentions were good, he observed, but the question was flawed.

For a better question, he quoted the movie *High Fidelity*, in which a character asked, "Do I listen to pop music because I'm miserable, or am I miserable because I listen to pop music?"

Zahl pointed to Jesus' statement in Mark 7 that sin is what comes out of a person rather than what goes in.

"So, art, culture, media ... may have the power to influence, may have the power to shape, may have the power to impact, but they do not have the ability to create something inside that is not already there," he said.

"In order for something like a pop song to make me miserable, there has to be a foothold that is already inside."

Since culture has no power to create, Christians give it too much power when they fear it, he suggested. Instead, Christ's followers should learn to use art, movies and other cultural expressions to reach people who have built up walls to the proclamation of the gospel from the pulpit.

"Art and story have the power to penetrate those defenses. Art and story also can be avenues for reaching Christians in areas where they don't even know they need to be reached," Zahl said.

Pixar movies have a wide appeal to children, teenagers and adults of all ages—a feat not achieved by many media, he pointed out.

"When something has almost universal appeal like that, Christians ought to take note," Zahl said.



David Zahl, founding executive director of Mockingbird Ministries, talks about "The Gospel According to Pixar."

Pixar films are not Christian films, so Christians shouldn't read into them but instead take things from them, he said.

"We're not trying to turn them into ideological instruments, but to the extent they are dealing with anything real, we can find points of connection," Zahl said.

"A lot of times, as Christians, we focus on the points of disconnect with popular culture rather than points of connection. As a result, we live in a very divided society. We live in a society where it is us versus them, and we are in desperate need of bridges.

"We need points of connection; we don't need any more points of disconnection. We can apply that approach to Pixar. We can turn culture into an opportunity rather than the enemy."

He noted the example of *Toy Story*. Through much of the movie, Buzz

Lightyear thinks he is a real space hero rather than a toy.

When he realizes he only is a toy, it creates an identity crisis. But Buzz ultimately realizes that despite his inadequacies, he is loved anyway.

"Does that story sound familiar?" Zahl asked.

Next, Zahl turned to the movie *Finding Nemo*. In one scene, Marlin, Nemo's father, and a friend, Dory, are inside a whale.

Marlin is holding onto a bump on the whale's tongue and is told he must let go if they are to be saved.

Like Marlin, Zahl said, we all must let go of the control we think we have over our lives if we are to be saved.

"The thing we think is going to give us life is often what is trying to kill us," he said.

Chris Legg, pastor of Green Acres' south campus and a licensed professional counselor, said that just as Jesus found his parables in his culture, Christians should look to movies to find parables that illustrate the gospel.

"Like Jesus looked at everyday life and found stories which had application for faith, we need to do the same," Legg said.

"We don't have much culture outside entertainment, so we've got to engage it. We don't need to be afraid. Of course, we need to be ready to say, 'That's not OK.'"

Christians should look at culture and take what is true from it, he said.

"All truth is God's truth. There is no other source of truth but God. And that is how we have to engage it," Legg said.

