

The great consternation of US American churches today are Millennials. Millennials are those born after 1980 (or so). Studying generations is an inexact science, but best estimates are that Millennials now comprise at least a quarter of the US American culture and workforce - somewhere between 50 and 80 million people. While all generations differ from those before them, Millennials are proving to be the most confounding generation yet as we move into adulthood. Business and thought leaders everywhere are scrambling to figure out how to engage, motivate and keep Millennials.

Churches, too, feel in this regard, many church leaders are no different. Countless blog posts have been dedicated to "What's wrong with the Church" or "Why Millennials don't like Church" or "How to get Millennials to come to your church". All of this is trying to get to the generation gap between Millennials and the older generations. Millennials are the first generation to grow up truly in the wake of Christendom. Many of us haven't heard of Jim Baker or the Religious Right. We grew up with the Catholic priest scandals. For us, "church" has always been a dirty word for a lot of our friends - maybe for us too. We're the children of Generation X. Gen X were the ones who left church - most Gen X'ers grew up in Church, raised with the stories of Noah's Ark and Moses and Joseph's amazing Technicolor dream-coat.

But when Gen X left the church, they didn't raise their kids with those stories. Which means - as so many studies have observed - Millennials don't know the Bible. We don't have the common language that even Gen-X'ers have with the Church. Many Millennials don't "come back" to church - they arrive for the first time. And for many of them, it's like stepping into a time machine.

Crafting a worship experience that effectively engages Millennials with the good news about Jesus takes more than rock music and skinny jeans. Millennials are the product of the fall of modernity, and as such we must reexamine the assumptions we've made about what makes worship formative.

Other panels here are ably exploring what a culturally-conversant yet faithful liturgy looks like. I want to focus specifically on preaching.

The ugly truth is that our preaching styles do not speak the language of Millennials. Our traditional models descend to us from the Enlightenment. They're lectures, designed to convince. They assume humans are essentially rational creatures that need primarily new information.

But as the modern age draws to a close, we've come to realize, among other things, that humans are not fundamentally rational creatures. We've learned again what the scriptures have told us all along - more information is not enough to save us. We require transformation.

Millennials sense this at a deep level. In many ways, they are primed to hear transformative preaching. Which means, as frustrating and difficult to understand as Millennials admittedly can be, they also represent untold potential for the future of the Church.

As church leaders, we have two choices: we can either blame Millennials for being a product of their time, or we can roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of incarnating our preaching. And since we serve a God who, when we were mired in the wages of our Sin, didn't wave us off as entitled brats who get what we deserve, but rather abandoned Heaven, cast off the privileges of divinity and became one of us, I suggest our choice is a no-brainer. We must learn to announce the good news about Jesus to Millennials. This is the call for American clergy in our time.

So. How do we preach to Millennials? First a word: this is a "do as I say, not as I do" talk. You're not unchurched millennials, and I'm not preaching. So this talk does not wholly embody the principles I'm advocating. That's because I'm transferring information, and numbered lists are perfect for transferring information. So with that in mind, allow me to break my first rule, and offer you three ways our preaching needs to change if we're going to engage unchurched Millennials with the good news about Jesus. I want to offer a philosophical change and a practical outworking of that change.

First, then, with all the irony I can muster, we have to do away with numbered lists. The days of a three point sermon (or a ten point or seventeen point sermon) are long gone. Numbered lists and alliterated acronyms are useful for transferring information.

But preaching that engages Millennials isn't informational, it's invitational. We should not be offering them facts so much as illustrating what a life lived with God looks like can be like and then inviting them to participate. The difference is much more than just semantics.

Three point sermons assume your listener needs to receive information as quickly and efficiently as possible. It assumes they already agree with you, that they share your worldview and assumptions. But this is not the case with many Millennials. They do not hold many of the basic tenants of Evangelical Christianity - beliefs as basic as the divinity of Jesus or the authority of Scripture.

Before you grumble, remember: they're listening to you. They've offered you 20 to 30 minutes of their precious time. Just because they don't agree with you doesn't mean they're not listening. They're searching for something and they have at least a suspicion that you might have some good news for them.

Don't offer them information. Offer them an invitation to new life. One of my favorite communicators, Nancy Duarte, says that one of the biggest mistakes communicators make is imagining ourselves to be the heroes of our sermons. Like Moses descending from Sinai with a new revelation, we are the persons who have been laboring the whole week with our sermon. We're excited about what we've found in the Scriptures. So we come to the pulpit like Luke Skywalker, armed with the Force to vanquish the forces of spiritual ignorance.

But Duarte asks us to imagine our listeners are the heroes of the story. They've entered our sanctuaries looking for something and we are Master Yoda. We offer them the good news about Jesus, but *they* are the ones who need to be transformed. If our sermons are doing their work, they have already been converting us to Jesus' way. So we offer what the Spirit has been doing in our lives as witness for those hearing. And our witness is an invitation. It is Phillip's "Come and see" to the skeptical Nathanaels hearing our announcement that we've found the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

What does this look like? A practical suggestion: don't begin with the Scripture. Many preachers begin their sermons by reading the Scripture, the message then becomes a response to the text (as it should be). But this approach assumes your listeners have come prepared to hear from the Scriptures. It assumes they find the text authoritative. And it assumes that they can understand the language of Scripture. But none of these is true of Millennials, particularly unchurched Millennials.

Our sermons must always arise from the Scripture, but the presentation need not begin there. Instead, imagine your sermon like a journey. Establish where you want your listeners to end up - what new belief or behavior do you want them to emulate? How is it different from who they are "now". In theological

terms, this means asking the question: how does the reality of Jesus' resurrection change how my listeners should think or behave? In other words, is the good news about Jesus actually good news for them?

Then begin not with the text, but with their world. Turn your whole sermon into a narrative with your listeners as the hero of the story. A good story is one where the protagonist has a problem. Begin by identifying a problem in the lives of your listeners, a problem the text addresses. A good story is a resolution of conflict, so once you've helped them to see the problem, you're in a position to move into the text, to demonstrate how Jesus' way is the best answer to their problem.

That might sound like felt-needs preaching, as though we're moving to the Scripture to proof-text pop-psychological self-help. And it *can* become that. But if you as the preacher will begin with the text, then this sort of narrative approach to preaching becomes the love-child of a careful exegesis of Scripture married to a careful exegesis of your congregation.

The next component of preaching that connects with unchurched Millennials is *authenticity*. That term has become buzz-worthy, but there's a reason for it. Millennials are disillusioned with institutions, and the only remedy for this is to let Millennials see our true selves, warts and all - especially the warts.

I'm relatively new to the Nazarene denomination - I've been in our denomination a little more than 5 years. And I have seen that this is hard for a lot of Nazarene preachers precisely because of our theology of entire sanctification. My informal survey of older Nazarene preachers has revealed that many who've been raised in our denomination do not feel able to be honest in their preaching. Because our preachers are expected to be entirely sanctified, and because we've historically understood entire sanctification to be a complete absence of sin, preachers are not honest in their preaching. They don't feel safe sharing faith struggles *even though they are actually experiencing them*.

This is kryptonite to a church hoping to engage Millennials. No matter our best intentions, if we are not honest about our faith struggles, our shortcomings, we come across as hypocritical and judgmental. When we never criticize ourselves, any critique we offer of the world comes across as condescending and cruel. Worse, when we don't share how God is working to redeem us, we rob our listeners of learning how redemption can look in their lives as well.

What does this vulnerability look like practically? If you're talking about doubts, share your doubts. If you're talking about questions, share your own questions. And here's one of my favorite rules from Tom Furest, one of my favorite preachers: Mark up your manuscript or notes. For every one time you criticize someone else, be sure you criticize yourself at least 5 times.

Another big part of authenticity is being yourself. Always choose a personal illustration over something you found on the internet. Don't try to be Bill Hybles or Andy Stanley. Learn from them, but be yourself. If you're not cool, don't try to be cool. If you don't like movies, don't try to use movie analogies. Millennials value authenticity above nearly everything else. So be yourself.

With one small proviso. The last component of preaching that connects with unchurched Millennials is *context*. Millennials are largely unfamiliar with Church culture. This is a problem because they're unfamiliar with the language of scripture. Throw out the word "sin" in a sermon, and you cannot be sure how Millennials will hear it. Will they associate it with mere bad behavior, a legacy of legalistic religion? Or will they think you're talking about bad karma? They almost certainly will not associate "sin" with our

choice not to live in God's world on God's terms, our unwillingness to keep the covenant that leads us to life.

And if they don't have a biblical understanding of a word as simple as Sin, what of words like Atonement, or Sanctification? Words as scandalous as redemption or grace or mercy? How could they understand such words? They do not have the literacy.

And yet our sermons assume they do understand. We throw out terms, reference biblical stories and generally assume a level of biblical and theological literacy in our listeners that we know isn't there (because often in the same sermons we bemoan the general lack of said literacy in the larger culture). We might as well be speaking in Chinese - we're offering the good news about Jesus in a language our listeners can't possibly understand.

In much the same way as missionaries, we must learn the language of Millennials. And that language is the language we call pop culture. The language of the NFL and MLB and Brad Pitt and Batman and Taylor Swift and Maroon 5. Of *True Detective* and *American Idol*. Of Harry Potter and Katniss Everdeen. It's the language of OMG and LOL and Snapchat and Instafriends.

If that seems overwhelming, inaccessible and daunting to you, then you know exactly how Millennials feel when they try to sit through our sermons, packed with their insider-language and church vocabulary. If you just thought to yourself, "That sounds like more trouble than it's worth," then you know exactly what Millennials are thinking when we preach.

This is a missions problem. Our culture has shifted and the church isn't keeping up. To borrow an observation from Andy Stanley, the culture is targeting 15 year olds, and the church is speaking to 55 year olds. If we want to reach Millennials with the life-changing, universe-shifting, eternity-altering good news about Jesus, then we *must* learn to speak their language. Yes that is difficult, especially for a denomination that has spent so many years keeping pop culture at arm's length. But this is the language of Millennials, and if we want to reach them, then we must be as Paul on Mars Hill, learning to speak their language, to identify the God who has gone before us and is working yes even in T-Swift's latest breakup song.

Practical advice on how to do learn to speak a language Millennials understand is challenging. As with learning any language, it takes a long time, and there's simply no replacement for lots and lots of practice. But two things you can do: first, review your sermon manuscript (or outline). Highlight any churchy words, words that only make sense in a Christian context - words like sin, grace, gospel, atonement. Ask yourself how you can communicate the meaning of this word without using the word itself.

You want to respond immediately - but those words are in the Bible! They're good, helpful, useful words! I don't disagree. But when we use these words in a church context, they become a shorthand that lets us circumvent thoughtful reflection on a text. Ask 5 different church folk what the word 'grace' means and you'll get some confused stares before they shrug and stutter... God... loves us? Grace is... good...

The problem with church words is not that they're bad words. It's that we've used them so often and so thoughtlessly we've forgotten what they mean. Doing the hard work of carefully defining these words in our sermons makes them accessible to both unchurched and church people alike - especially if you

can demonstrated how these words make sense in their everyday world. If you can illustrate what's wrong with Christopher Nolan's take on atonement in *The Dark Knight Rises* or what Sir Mix-A-Lot can teach us about prophetic imagination, you're going to connect with Millennials and leave them seeing their whole world differently.

So go through your manuscript. Highlight the churchy words. And replace them with language people use outside the Church. See if you can do it.

One final tip - you may not know what language people use outside the church. As pastors, we easily surround ourselves with only churched friends. But if we hope to connect and engage people outside the church, we must learn to speak *their* language. This is what incarnation looks like - God didn't wait for us to become holy before we could have a relationship with him. He stripped himself of his divine privilege and came to us, spoke our language. I'm sure I don't have to remind the preachers in this room that Jesus rarely hung out with the religious. His teachings were not full of church words, but stories about farmers, fathers, sons and employees. He took the language of the people he hung around.

So you might need to get some new friends. Some friends who are far from God. Some atheists and Buddhists and spiritual-but-not-religious and some I-never-really-thought-too-much-about-that-whole-God-thing-befores. Let them teach you how to speak to them. It will make you a better preacher.

So: preach narratives, not lectures. Be authentic. And learn the context of the unchurched. This is what we need to do to connect unchurched Millennials with the good news about Jesus. We stand in the rubble of Christendom and we can either look backwards and bemoan our losses, or we can charge confidently in the future, confident that God is doing a new thing (as God always does) and that God is calling Millennials to be part of it and God is calling *we who have been called as clergy* to lead them into this new future.