

good idea!

A resource for evangelism & congregational development

Evangelistic Preaching Today: What to Say When People Don't Know What You're Talking About



by Jenny Andison

Preaching when people knew the Bible stories and Christian language was one thing. Preaching today has to start further back and take less for granted in the minds of our hearers. How does one connect with people who come to church to "explore their spirituality" but know nothing of Christian tradition?

I recently read that Google is scrambling to hire the most talented math and science graduates, in a bid to secure its global dominance as a search engine provider. Google now uses billboards bearing a mathematical problem: solve it for the telephone number to call for a job interview. With that exclusive entryway, Google is assured of only the cleverest job applicants.

Where we are now

Sometimes I think that modern preaching is like a Google billboard: if you can decipher what I am saying, then you are welcome in our exclusive club. In our post-Christian culture, sermons are increasingly incomprehensible for people who are exploring Christian faith for the first time. I was recently given an orchid by a young man as a thank you present. Growing up, he had been taught that Jesus was rather like Santa Claus, not an historical figure but harmless enough. "Thank you" he said, "for showing me that Jesus is a real person. I had no idea." This young man is not the exception to the rule: he represents the mission field in which we now serve.

What does it mean to preach when our congregations will have even just one person present who is like that young man? Since this is the place we now find ourselves in, I would argue that all preaching must

be evangelistic preaching. The congregations in which we all serve have a mix of believers, seekers, church members who may not necessarily believe, and everyone in between. This is where preaching evangelistically becomes both a challenge and an opportunity.

Where we would like to be

In the congregation where I serve, I have a clear sense each Sunday morning that God is passing us the ball and saying, "Here they are: these people have come to church. Make sure you tell them about me!" Research suggests that when a "seeker" comes to church and is genuinely searching for God, they are likely to give church one try and one try only. That being the case, our preaching has to create a space for them in which they can encounter the truth about God. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, has determined that every time he preaches he will encapsulate the Gospel in some form, no matter how brief, so that everyone who has come that day can say, "Yes, I have heard about God's love and what Jesus has done for me."

It would be wonderful if our preaching could not only nourish faithful followers of Christ, but also pique *(continued on page 2)*

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the interest of seekers and show them glimpses of what a relationship with God in Christ could mean for their lives. Some will say that evangelistic preaching on Sunday mornings does not spiritually nourish the Christians in the congregation. But this need not be the case. A sermon that is sensitive to the seeker will, by its very focus on who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus, nourish a faithful believer. In any case, a Christian also has the opportunity for spiritual nourishment in small group settings and through personal prayer and Bible study. These opportunities are not likely to exist yet for the seeker who has shown up on Sunday.

How we might get there

Preaching with the seeker in mind is a wonderful opportunity and here are a few simple things to remember.

1) It is helpful to start where the seeker is in their life and then bring them to the truth about God revealed in the Bible.

At a parish that I used to serve in, each week the rector would take his video recorder into the local pub and interview people about the sermon topic that would be coming up. He would then use clips of these interviews on Sunday mornings as a way of letting people speak for themselves, of bringing the thoughts, doubts, beliefs and fears of the average seeker into the service. He would then use these clips as jumping off points to look at the Biblical text for the week. This approach is similar to that of Paul at Athens in Acts 17. Rather than starting with scripture, Paul begins with things in their culture: their altar to an unknown God and their poets. Then, at the end of his sermon, he takes them to Jesus.

2) If we are to preach on things that people are actually interested in, then we will need to be students of our culture. That means we need to know what the current top movies are (and preferably have seen them), what are the most popular

books (and have at least glanced at them), who is at the top of the charts (and be able to pronounce their names). Knowing what was current ten or even five years ago simply won't do. It is not by chance that as Paul begins his sermon in Athens, he says, "As I walked around your city, I looked carefully at the objects of your worship."

3) We need to be aware of the depth of Biblical illiteracy in our culture.

Remember that young man I mentioned who was unaware that Jesus was an historical figure. We will therefore watch our language when we preach and take very little for granted. It takes longer to explain that Pontius Pilate was a Roman governor, or that the word gospel means "good news," but it is worth it.

4) Our congregations need to know that modern preaching needs to be evangelistic. They need to be shown why and how an effective sermon will be sensitive to the seekers present, and that preaching is not only for their benefit. The good shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep to go and look for the one that was lost.

5) I find it helpful to write and pray through my sermon with one specific seeker in mind. It may be a friend or a family member, or a person who actually came to your church recently. So as I am writing and praying, I will be thinking, "Will Terry understand this? What would he make of this?"

I am only beginning to grasp the complexities of evangelistic preaching myself, and so have much to learn, but I do know that there is no greater thrill in ministry than finding out that your sermon brought someone closer to the fullness of Christian faith.

Jenny Andison is the associate priest at St. Paul's Bloor Street, with responsibility for Evangelism, Mission and Outreach. She is also the author of Wycliffe Booklet on Evangelism #4, Doors into Faith: Inviting Friends to Join the Big Game.

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The Gospel According to *Crash*

by John van Sloten

Movies are a place where the spiritual concerns of our culture often intersect with the Gospel. John van Sloten has become well-known in Calgary and around the world for “preaching from the culture.” Here he offers a sermon which analyzes a popular current movie in the light of the Christian message.

The 2005 Academy Award winning film, *Crash*, is one of the most profound and powerful films I’ve ever experienced. Its insight into the human condition is piercing; a brutal commentary on our desperate need for God. Unearthing. Disturbing. It wakes you up.

If you’ve ever wondered why we need the Christian story of Easter—its Good Friday darkness and its Sunday morning hope—*Crash* will give you all the evidence you need. And not very politely—in fact it will sideswipe you. “Nobody leaves this movie unscathed,” says Hollywood director Paul Haggis. He’s right. Culpability is assured: so is grace.

The primary vehicle used in preaching the message of *Crash* is racism. But not simply racism: it includes all kinds of relational brokenness. A Caucasian gun store owner toward a Persian man; that same Persian man towards an Hispanic locksmith; a corrupt white cop toward a black woman, another black woman toward that same white cop; the rich toward poor, the poor toward the rich; and, last but certainly not least, we, the viewing audience, toward our very selves. In engaging the film, we realize that we’re no different from the story’s characters; we’re just as broken, just as guilty as they are.

The soldiers, having braided a crown from thorns, set it on his head, threw a purple robe over him, and approached

him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Then they greeted him with slaps in the face. (JOHN 19:2-3, THE MESSAGE)

There’s a scene where two clean-cut young black men are walking along, talking about the unfairness of racism, the discrimination of stereotyping. As a viewer you find yourself walking alongside them, nodding in agreement with their assertions, sharing their incredulity at the injustice of it all. And then, in a shocking twist of plot, the two pull out their concealed weapons and ruthlessly carjack a rich white couple. All of your broad minded, liberal sensitivities go out the window.

Even our stereotypes of relationally broken reality are not as clearly defined as we’d like to think. Good and evil are inextricably intertwined. *Crash* unpacks us.

A rich white woman screams at her husband regarding her concerns that the tattooed Hispanic locksmith currently working in the next room is a gang member. With him, we’re sickened as we overhear her prejudicial rant; with her, we’re sickened as we overhear ourselves.

And then, in the most disturbing subplot of all, we meet a saviour, the only redeemable character in the film; a good white cop named Tommy. We see the with him at his partner’s blatant bigotry. We stand with him when he’s (continued on page 4)



Good and evil are

inextricably intertwined.

Crash unpacks us.

The Gospel According to Crash *(continued from page 3)*

*And they nailed him to the cross...
(MARK 15:22-24, THE MESSAGE)*

Putting God on a cross is the ultimate manifestation of human relational brokenness. Depravity is most proudly displayed via our ability to stereotype, prejudice, and reject God. We choose to see what we want to see, we limit the truth, both in the person of Jesus Christ and in ourselves. Somehow we manage to get to the place where we see ourselves as right and God as wrong; it's the pinnacle of human pride. We become blind to who God really is. One could not conceive of a more tangible way not to "give God the time of day."

And yet at the very moment that depravity reached its zenith, so too did the providential love of God. While we're busy

hammering in the last few nails, living out our denial based self-righteousness, God tearfully looked down on us, at the mess we'd got ourselves into, at the suffering of his Son, and screamed out, "Enough!" And the whole time, Jesus peered straight into our eyes and prayed for us, "Father forgive them."

The moment we were at our worst, God was at his best. He died, we found life. We sinned, he saved. Our darkness made his light seem even brighter.

And what's really intriguing about it all is this fact: the whole time this story is playing out, we have no idea what's going on. We're being saved behind our backs. While we're still messed up, and messing up, Jesus died for us.

We can see this same reality playing out in *Crash*. Throughout the movie, we're given visual clues every time the camera

challenged on his racial idealism. We celebrate human potential with him when he saves a black man, caught in an explosive confrontation with police. And then we die with him when, later in the film, he ends up shooting a young black hitchhiker, all because of a meaningless prejudicial misunderstanding.

Then we cry out in despair with the Apostle Paul:

There's nobody living right, not even one, nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God. They've all taken the wrong turn; they've all wandered down blind alleys. No one's living right; I can't find a single one... They never give God the time of day. (ROMANS 3:10-18, THE MESSAGE)

Everywhere we turn we're faced with questions. Are we really like this? This perverted? This twisted? Have all of us turned aside and become corrupt? Is there no one who does good, even one? Who's going to save us from this mess?

The soldiers brought Jesus to Golgotha, meaning "Skull Hill." They offered him a mild painkiller (wine mixed with myrrh), but he wouldn't take it.

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looks down from above on the city, or on a particular scene, offering us a “God’s eye” view of things. This perspective cues us to the fact that someone is seeing all of this.

The whole back half of the Crash story is filled with this kind of serendipitous salvation scene.

The storyline goes even further, opening our eyes and hearts to the fact that someone is also mysteriously acting *through* all of this.

In a powerful scene of redemption, the most despicable character in the film, a bigoted white cop, ends up being the officer on the scene for a terrible car accident.

The black woman whose life is hanging in the balance is the same woman he’d physically assaulted the night before. Initially both are horrified at the situation—and then something else mysteriously takes over. A greater good rises up within that peace officer’s heart and he risks his life trying to free her from the burning wreck. She lets go of her anger and trusts him, having no choice but to let him save her. All the while the mystical music of the movie’s soundtrack plays in the background. Arm in arm they run from the fiery scene, falling into a trembling, tearful embrace. Then the car explodes and the camera pulls up into the sky.

Redemption. Hope. God stepped in and saved them, despite themselves.

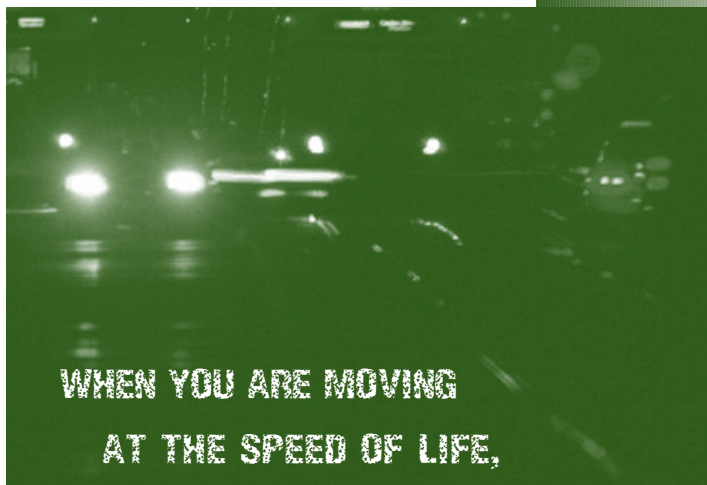
God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.
(ROMANS 3:24, 26-28, THE MESSAGE)

The whole back half of the *Crash* story is filled with this kind of serendipitous salvation scene; saving foisted upon undeserving souls. The whole back half

of our life stories are filled with this kind of serendipitous scene. It’s what Easter is all about; God at work behind the scenes, resurrecting us in spite of ourselves—mysteriously, graciously, making all things new.

John van Sloten is the founding pastor of New Hope Community Church (CRC) in Calgary AB. Other sermons of his can be heard online at www.newhopechurch.ca.

John is also a new Institute Associate, offering workshops on “Preaching From the Culture.” Contact Nicole Poitras at npoitrasca@yahoo.ca for details of how to book John for an event in your area.



WHEN YOU ARE MOVING
AT THE SPEED OF LIFE,

WE ARE BOUND TO
COLLIDE WITH
EACH OTHER.

(CRASH)

Baptized into the School of Jesus

by John Bowen

Baptisms are frequently a time when people come to church who do not normally do so. How can one preach in such a way that their attention is caught by the explanation of what is going on, and they want to come back to learn more? This sermon, for the baptism of an imaginary baby "Laura," uses the image of the Christian life as a school to try to catch the imagination of such listeners.

Christians haven't always called themselves Christians. "Christian" is actually a label that was stuck on them by people who were *not* Christians.

The name by which the first Christians called themselves most often was "disciple," literally a "learner" or a "student." For them, when they thought of Christian faith, the thing that came to their mind first was not church or services or the ten commandments or being a good citizen... but learning!

Which means that for them the church was first and foremost a school, and the Christian life a process of learning. And for them baptism was simply the way that you enrolled in the school.

Well, that raises some interesting questions. Where on earth is this school? What is it for? What do you learn there? What are the teaching methods? Who are the teachers? And where are classes held? Can you graduate? And is it true that the graduate programs are out of this world?

The easiest question to answer is: who is the teacher? Jesus! Many times in the pages of the earliest biographies of Jesus he is called teacher; and a couple of times he calls himself by the same title.

But what is it that he teaches? What is the curriculum in this school Jesus is running? He said on one occasion, "I have come so that people might have life and have it in all its fullness!" (John 10:10)

That's it! Jesus is a teacher of life: he teaches us how to live as God's people in God's world in God's way—and in the friendship of God.

That's what people saw in Jesus: it's what gave him that unique quality of being fully alive; it's

what attracted people to be his disciples. They wanted to learn the life that they saw in Jesus.

But I want to ask: **how do you learn this kind of life?** I'll tell you how you *don't* learn it. Jesus' school is not an academic kind of place. The school of Jesus is not a school for passing on information. You may know the definition of a lecture as the process whereby the professor's notes become the student's notes without passing through the minds of either.

Jesus was not into that kind of learning.

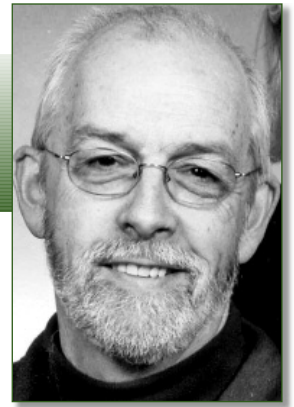
So in the school of Jesus, **how do we learn?** Jesus has a specially vivid image for this:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am humble and gentle in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(MATTHEW 11:28-30)

There in the centre of this saying of Jesus is his offer to be our teacher: "Come... Learn from me."

And he gives us a powerful image to explain how we learn. He says, "Take my yoke upon you." I was in Africa this past summer, and sometimes saw an ox-cart pulled by two oxen yoked together. One reason for doing this is to train young oxen: a farmer will link together an experienced ox and a young ox, and, as they pull the plough together, the older ox shows how it is done, as it were.

That's what Jesus is saying by this picture. He is saying, I am already wearing the yoke of being God's person in God's world. Come and



What is the curriculum in this school Jesus is running? ... Jesus is a teacher of life.

walk alongside me, share the yoke I'm already carrying, and I will teach you what I know.

What kind of learning would that be? It will be very different according to who we are. But just as in those first days, it may well involve such things as:

learning to be more generous;
learning how to forgive;
learning to come alongside someone
who is a bit of a misfit.

Jesus the Teacher may also want to mess with our career plans, or our retirement plans, or our holiday plans. The list is endless: the lessons of Jesus' school are as diverse as the situations a hundred people can find themselves in over the course of a week!

If this sounds difficult, well, it is. **But there are encouragements here.** Firstly, Jesus says he is a teacher who is gentle and humble. He is the kind of teacher who is nurturing, and patient with our mistakes, and who takes time and trouble with us individually.

“Jesus, you know what you said about being your student and sharing your yoke? I really think I'd like to do that.”

Then too he says his yoke is “easy.” For anyone who has been a follower of Jesus for more than about 24 hours, that sounds a little strange. Being a Christian is often tough! But I believe that what he is saying is that his yoke is well-fitting. It's like when you're looking for a pair of new shoes, and you finally find one that's just right. You say, “That's a really easy fit,” meaning it's comfortable, it's right for you. This is the sense in which Jesus' yoke is “easy”—not that it's no sweat but that it fits us well. After all, in those days, yokes were made one by one for individual oxen, so Jesus is saying, My yoke is made specially for you. It doesn't mean there won't be work, it doesn't mean there won't be difficulty—but it will still be the yoke I made for you.

One more thing. Jesus was being pretty practical when he said these words. And when he said, “Come to me!” that wasn't a theoretical statement, and his hearers knew it.

In my imagination, when he had finished, and the crowds were going home for supper, there were some who didn't leave straight away. They pushed through the crowd and came up to Jesus, maybe a little hesitantly, and said something like this, “Jesus, you know what you said about being your student and sharing your yoke?

I really think I'd like to do that. Is there some kind of application form? Do I have to get transcripts?” And whoever that person was, whatever they had done, wherever they had been in their spiritual journey, Jesus said, “That's great. You're welcome. We're just going to have supper. Come eat with us and I'll introduce you to the others.”

What we're doing today by baptizing Laura is registering her in the school of Jesus. We want her to grow up with Jesus as her teacher, so that she learns to be the unique person her Creator planned for her to be, to live as God's person in God's world in God's way—and with the friendship of God.

But what about us? Some of us have never thought of Christianity this way. It's a new idea. Others of us would have to say, Well, I used to be involved in church when I was younger, but I've kinda skipped a lot of classes in recent years.

But, you know what? In one sense, nothing has changed since that first day. We can speak to Jesus just as if he were present here in the flesh. And the offer of becoming his student, learning to live as God's person in God's world in God's way, still stands, whoever we are, however long we've been out of school. And his invitation, “Come to me,” is just as real today as it was two thousand years ago. And now just as then he waits to see what we will say.



John Bowen is Director of the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism.

Sources of Resources

Wycliffe Media

Evangelism as Dance—a 20 minute talk by Brian McLaren, given at the Institute fund-raising dinner in April 2006. CD: \$10.

Evangelism as a Ministry of the Whole People of God—a 25 minute introduction to evangelism as process, by John Bowen. DVD: \$15.

Are the Chronicles of Narnia an Evangelistic Text?—a 40 minute talk by John Bowen, originally given at Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids MI. CD: \$10.

To order any of these, contact Lida at (416) 946-3535, or at wycliffe.college@utoronto.ca.

Institute Associates

Institute Associates are congregational leaders from across the country with a track record of effective ministry in some area of revitalization and evangelism. The Institute is publicizing their giftedness and availability so that they can be a resource for other congregations.

Associates are available for events such as:

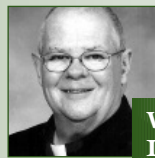
- Diocesan or Area Conferences
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The Wycliffe College Booklets on Evangelism

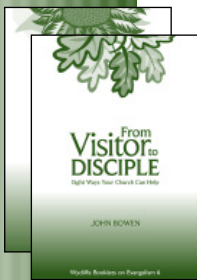
This growing series offers practical help to clergy and lay leaders in various aspects of parish-based evangelism. Each offers biblical and theological reflection as well as practical suggestions by writers experienced in their field. They are short (20-25 pages), practical, and biblical.

Titles currently available are:

- #1 **Preaching the Church's Mission: Sermons Towards Self-Understanding** by John Bowen
- #2 **Just the Basics: Teaching Christian Faith to Beginners** by Harold Percy and John Bowen
- #3 **Unwrapping all our Gifts: A Neglected Key to Evangelism** by Judy Paulsen
- #4 **Doors into Faith: Inviting Friends to Join the Big Game** by Jenny Andison
- #5 **Connecting Young People & the Gospel: How Trinitarian Love Shapes Youth Ministry** by Valerie Michaelson
- #6 **From Visitor to Disciple: Eight Ways Your Church Can Help** by John Bowen

To order any or all of these titles, contact Lida at the college, by phone at (416) 946-3535 or by email at wycliffe.college@utoronto.ca. The booklets are also available at Crux, the College bookstore. The price is \$5 each, plus postage and handling.

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