

Protagonist Corner

Preach What You Know: The Good, The Bad, and the Tacky

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In the Reformed tradition, we pride ourselves on having well-educated clergy. That's worth celebrating. In a world of power point presentations, video streaming, blackberry beaming, and television advertisements that find their way even into our children's public schools, there's nothing wrong with gathering on a Sunday morning and listening to someone talk seriously about a book.

As people of the Book, we deal in the tactile pleasure of the page between fleshy fingers, the ears that strain to hear. Amidst the din of the world, we believe that the voice of an ordinary human being may, in that moment of preaching, lead us to hear the bigger voice of God.

But if we may move from the Big Book to a culture of books, it is fair to note that with all this respect for books comes a bookish clergy. In opening up the Big Book, we may find ourselves leaning on other books. We may quote from the words written by a dearly cherished seminary professor or a beautifully truth-telling novelist. Congregations may learn after a while who our favorite authors are.

One lay person told me, "Our pastor, he always quotes from that German guy. The one whose name begins with a B. Very serious stuff. About the Nazis." If the words of Bonhoeffer trip off the preacher's tongue week after week, the laity catch the trend. We all have our pet supports in the preaching tasks, whether it's an anecdote from a story collection or an excerpt from a theologian. As preachers, we naturally share words we love with the people God loves. We attempt to shape others with the words God has used to shape us. These are intimate words indeed.

Therefore, I hope we would not, as bookish clergy, consider sharing the words of some author we had not read. Most of us would consider it rather cheap, perhaps even unethical, to hold forth on the opinions and content of a book we had never read. We know better.

So why is it that preachers feel free to do this with television shows? How many times have I heard a bookish preacher, in a strained attempt to reflect on something other than her three favorite authors, bravely venture out into pop culture—only to speak about a television show she has not seen? The script often goes something like this: "I certainly have not actually watched the show *Survivor*, or any of those reality shows for that matter. But I know enough to state that this kind of lowbrow, dog-eat-dog behavior...."

Now this might not be so painful, except when you consider that the erudite preacher is addressing a group of people, many of whom actually *have* watched the television show *Survivor*. So now they are subjected to listening to the preacher pontificate on a subject about which she knows nothing.

Even more alienating is the duck-and-cover behind secondary sources on pop culture. "I have not seen *American Idol* myself," one preacher remarked, "but I have been following its progress in the *New York Times*." He then proceeded to draw cultural, even biblical conclusions, God help us, from a cultural event he neither

understood nor had experienced. For preachers to think that this does not alienate our listeners is the ultimate arrogance. How can the word of Jesus, who spent time with the prostitutes and the tax collectors, be spoken through the pretensions of a preacher who is too highbrow to participate in the pop culture he critiques?

Now does this mean that preaching classes should require clergy to spend as much time watching *The Jerry Springer Show* as they do reading Graham Greene? Of course not. You only have to watch *The Jerry Springer Show* if you are going to preach about it. Is that too much to ask? Conversely, if you are not going to raise that sleazy talk show in a sermon, you should not feel obligated to watch it. But perhaps we ought to.

Perhaps as preachers we should expose ourselves to the television shows, the entertainment, and the talk radio our parishioners are listening to—not to the exclusion of the materials that feed our faith and our preaching already, but as small, metered doses of reality of the lives of those who sit in our pews. Rather than reveling in the preaching event as our weekly chance to conduct a one-way conversation in which we tell the listeners about the books we have loved, or the great films we have admired, or the creative art that has brought us closer to the great Creator, what if we asked the same questions of them? What if, in the visits into people's homes, we carefully noted the shows that were playing on the television, or the songs on the radio, and followed up respectfully, listening, in order to understand why they listen? For we follow a Savior who did not teach using the tools of disdain, but joined the people and taught them of the beauty of God in both the beauty and in the ugliness of life.

I have heard some great sermons from preachers who speak about what they know, or have at least tried to know. "At first I couldn't see why anyone would ever listen to that music," the preacher begins "but after hearing it, I saw...." Their words, even when they critique pop culture, have a ring of authenticity that opens ears in a way that a thirdhand analysis cannot. Having earned the respect of the listener by listening herself, the preacher can then offer a sincere gospel critique, as one who has sat through *The Jerry Springer Show* and found that indeed, it was not good. Now, we're talking. Yet, in the grossness available in our erstwhile entertainment culture buffet, are there limits? Do we have to fill our plate with it all? Or can we sample? And just how much do we have to digest in order to know what makes the soul sick?

To preach about the pop culture phenomenon of internet pornography, does the preacher first have to indulge? To preach about the dangers of gambling as entertainment, does the preacher first have to blow the family's college fund? To preach about the harm of misogynist music lyrics, does the preacher have to pad the pockets of the record companies who profit from such hate? These are provocative and edgy questions that followers of an incarnated God should not shy away from. Here, I believe we can hope for both some discretion and some creativity.

If we must preach against the lyrics, we should listen to them somewhere, but perhaps from the borrowed CD of a teen in the church, combined with a pastoral conversation afterwards. Preachers have a long history of preaching about vices we understand not because we have committed all of them, but presumably because we have sat the sides of hospital beds or held the shaky hands of those who have been so ensnared. We can know about things we have not experienced as the Holy Spirit moves between us in God's healing ministry in the church. But that's a far cry from "I never saw this awful so-called musician myself, but in the *Atlantic Monthly* they said he was the worst...."

Speaking about pop culture requires the same care that speaking about books requires. As preachers, we don't have to read, experience, or know everything. But we do have to have some knowledge about the things we choose to speak about. In preaching, the stakes are high. People sit in the pews wrestling with pain, or receiving the Spirit, but they are open to our words in a way they are not open to others. If we refer to what they were watching last Saturday night, we at least owe them the courtesy of having watched it ourselves.

Sometimes it's hard not to hold forth on the evils of a movie we just know we would find offensive. Sometimes it's hard not to go for the cheap laugh at the expense of nationwide phenomenon we think is beneath us, and perhaps assume is beneath the congregation as well. But how do we know?

We listen, we pray, and we talk honestly to our brothers and sisters in Christ. As we share what we personally find to be artistic, life-giving, and divinely uplifting, let us resist the temptation to create straw men out of what we have not seen ourselves. To share beauty with one another, we do not have to denigrate what we do not know. In coming to know what we think we despise, we may come to know one another more, and to know the Savior who loved us so much, he lived right here on earth, with the good, the bad, and the tacky.