

Preach the Word

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This issue of Preach the Word begins a new series: preaching to Millennials while maintaining connection with other generations. This series, planned in cooperation with the Commission on Evangelism, departs from previous custom with a different writer for each issue. Mike Geiger is a 1997 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He served an exploratory outreach setting in Cary, North Carolina for 12 years before accepting his current call to serve as pastor of adult discipleship and outreach at Good Shepherd in Burnsville, MN. He serves on the WELS Commission on Evangelism. He writes not as the expert but to encourage and spark a discussion of how we can better communicate the saving Gospel of Jesus to the millennial generation.

Exegizing your text...your audience!

By Mike Geiger

Exegesis. It's what every preacher does every time (I pray) before he preaches. He spends significant time in the original languages of the text to draw out the meaning and clear interpretation of the text. How can a preacher expound on a specific text, proclaim clearly specific law and specific gospel, appropriate and apply the truth of Scripture, unless he first invests time to do a careful exegesis of the text? In fact our seminary training has focused us on mastering the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew. We've invested hours of learning to understand sentence structures, verb forms, and hundreds of vocables. Even though some of these skills may have slipped and we have relegated some of our exegetical work to the help of software such as Logos, we still take great care every week to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV). Exegizing the text allows us to carefully mine the Scriptures in order to clearly communicate the truth of God's Word from that particular text to the particular people God has gathered before us that week.

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God's people? I'm not talking about getting out *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Robertson) or the *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brown, Driver, Briggs) and memorizing verb forms and vocables (although it might not be a bad idea). I am suggesting that communicating the Word of God involves a speaker **and** a hearer. I am suggesting that just as we shortchange the Word of God by doing a superficial exegesis of the text, we perhaps also miss clearly communicating God's timeless truth if we fail to exegize our audience...the people to whom we speak.

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The Word of God is changeless and timeless. The people to whom we preach changes from week to week or year to year, from community to community, from culture to culture, from generation to generation. How God's Word applies to one, perhaps, is not an application to which another relates. The terminology we choose for one audience, may go over the head of another. The application and appropriation of God's Word for one generation may not be the same application and appropriation another generation understands.

In this volume of *Preach the Word*, the Commission on Evangelism in partnership with the Commission on Worship and various



writers will tackle an audience that is found in our churches but which, sadly to some degree, may be drifting from our churches. And yet we eagerly desire for this audience to gather regularly around the Means of Grace.

Who are these people? They are the Millennials.

First of all, these are souls who matter to Jesus and therefore matter to us. They are worth understanding so that we can be instruments of God's Spirit to communicate saving truth to them and equip others to do the same. These are individuals who need the message of God's grace as much as the next person, but don't always think the way we think, value what we value, or understand what we understand. Nonetheless, they are worth listening to...so that they will listen to what God wants them to know and believe. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Understand, what follows are generalizations. In your ministry context you may well find exceptions. A thorough "audience exegesis" must happen in your community and with the individuals to whom God has called you to bring the Word of Truth. However, generalizations are a place to start in our exegizing of our audience. Consider each of these descriptions as food for thought as you craft a message to connect in a relevant way to this demographic of souls.

So, who are these individuals, the Millennials?

This demographic of individuals born from 1980 to 2000 (approximately) is having an increasing influence and impact on the culture around us. Their thought processes, their values, and their interests are overshadowing what previous generations have thought, valued, and found of interest. So if our clergy culture and learning as well as our main audience for preaching are dominantly Baby Boomers and Generation X's, it's time to broaden our awareness and exegize the audience of the Millennials.

To give you a start, here is a Top 10 List of Millennial generation generalities:

1. They grew up in a post-Christian era (Gen X's left the church but were raised in the church. Many Millennials have had no connection to the church.)
2. They are biblically illiterate. Key stories and biblical terminology are not in their awareness.
3. They do not have a biblical worldview. Secular humanism has molded their worldview.
4. They often see Christianity as judgmental and hypocritical (Secularization. White, p. 48).
5. They see spirituality as "anything an individual desires it to be—a private affair to be developed as one sees fit" (Privatization. White, p. 49).
6. They are "confronted with a staggering number of ideologies and faith options competing for their attention" (Pluralization. White, p. 50).
7. They are interested in truth but want to *experience* the truth more than *being told* what truth is. They want to know if the truth you present works for you and for others.
8. They are more interested in rallying around a cause than perpetuating a program. They want to make a difference, a positive impact, not just be busy in a church program.
9. They aren't necessarily committed to a congregation, but desire to have community. The institution is not important... social connections are.
10. They are interested in what you have to say, but more interested in who you are. Are you being authentic, sharing your questions and struggles?

My personal awareness of the work I need to do to better exegize this audience came on New Year's Eve this past year. As we were enjoying the evening waiting for midnight we were playing iHeart Radio top songs for 2014. My 10 year old daughter was singing along to some. I was completely clueless. Just looking at the Billboard Top 100 leads me to realize people like Pharrell Williams, Katy Perry, John Legend, and Iggy Azalea are people who are somewhat foreign to my mind, but readily influencing the minds of Millennials and others. I too have some work to do to exegize my audience.

You, preacher, wouldn't be the first one to understand the importance of knowing your audience to reach them with the Gospel. Inspired speakers and writers throughout the Scripture took the changeless truth to changing audiences. Not every audience receives information the same way as another. Consider the Apostle Paul. To the Jews in Thessalonica (Acts 17:20) he reasoned with them to show that Jesus was the Messiah. To the Greeks in Athens (Acts 17:16ff) he started his "sermon" with the natural knowledge of God. To the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) he rightly divided the Word of Truth to divide law and gospel so the gospel was free from attachments of the law. You might say all of them had the purpose of proclaiming God's grace...but it was done differently because of different audiences.

As a preacher, see this as a challenge to be embraced rather than

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an issue we hope will go away. It might be easier if we could just preach to Lutherans who have grown up in WELS and have our shared tenets of faith ready at a moment's recall. It might perhaps be easier...but that is not what God has called us to do. The Lord Jesus knew that every people of every generation was important, so he commissioned all his followers, including preachers: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). This commission includes different cultures **and** different generations.

For a textual exegesis you have resources on your book shelf or Logos on your computer. Wouldn't it be great to have resources for understanding Millennials and others in your audience easily available on your book shelf or at the click of a mouse?

Some beginning work can be done with a click of your mouse or purchasing a few books. Simply typing "Understanding Millennials" into a Google search will give you many websites that parse the information for different applications. Try "Preaching to Millennials" and you will connect with another set of articles. From our WELS fellowship, check out Pastor James Hein's blog series on Millennials (<https://pastorjameshein.wordpress.com/tag/millennials/>). To add to your library, you might pick up a few books such as *The Rise of the Nones* by James Emery White. (The Commission on Evangelism focused on this book for a year to study this demographic and our need to connect with it.) James White offers a blog that is worth

subscribing to called "Church and Culture." See also *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman or *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* by Thom Rainer. These books will give you the results of interviews and research to glean insights into this generation.

But let's not neglect the reality that the best exegesis of your audience comes when we follow Christ's directive to "go." God has sent you to a context and community of ministry. This is where the generalities of blog posts and books become the reality of the people to whom God has called **you** to preach the gospel.

Start with the Millennials who are in your congregation or have drifted from attending regularly—perhaps a good "excuse" to make an elder visit. Take time to ask questions and to listen to their responses. Spend some time in your community. Sit in a Starbucks or Caribou; observe and interact. Talk to your high school teens about what they listen to, watch, or pay attention to. Or perhaps hang out at the Genius Bar at the Apple Store if your community has one. The goal? Exegize the audience in your community.

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If you are a preacher from the Boomer or Gen X generation, you don't need to embrace all the millennial mindset, but it would be wise to understand it and adapt your preaching to connect with it. Certainly in our desire to connect with any generation we will ask what is permissible, but perhaps not beneficial. But we will always carry the heart of the Apostle Paul who was willing to become a Jew to the Jew to win the Jew and a Greek to the Greek to win the Greek. Can I become a Millennial to win the Millennial?

Can I become a Millennial to win the Millennial?

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

So for the sake of the Gospel, the power it has for salvation, and the soul of the Millennial, let's embark on this preaching adventure together.

Upcoming Topics

1. **TOPIC: Preaching to the Biblically Ignorant without Being Biblically Arrogant**

Purpose: Assist the preacher in communicating biblical persons, language and terms to an audience that may have little or no awareness of the same.

2. **TOPIC: Preaching the Law without Being Judgmental**

Purpose: To help the preacher hone a skill to be clear about God's law, but present it in a non-judgmental way.

3. **TOPIC: Preaching with a Cause**

Purpose: To help the preacher communicate in sermons the vital "cause" of Christianity and its personal benefit for people (especially in eternity).

4. **TOPIC: The "Sermon" after the Sermon**

Purpose: As a preacher expounds the Word of God, God's Spirit gives people something to believe AND live. How does your preaching encourage individuals throughout their week to live a sermon of the Christian life so others may see and "praise their Father in heaven."

5. **TOPIC: Including the Story in your Preaching**

Purpose: Give the preacher ideas that while the greatest story ever told is Jesus Christ, the second best stories are the impact Jesus Christ has on lives. Give examples of how we might use testimony in preaching.

Upcoming Topics

We invite interaction on the new Worship blog site: blogs.wels.net. Can we have some constructive dialogue around the articles and the issues? The authors don't profess to have all the answers. They don't claim their insights are more powerful than the gospel or make it more powerful. We just want to communicate the power of the gospel to the millennial generation as best we can.

Exegizing Your Audience

Three tasks of a Good Missionary (*Rise of the Nones*, p. 114)

1. Learn the language: educate yourself on how to talk in a way that people can understand and to which they can relate and eventually respond.
2. Study the culture: become so sensitized to that culture that you can operate effectively within it.
3. Translate the gospel: translate it into its own cultural context so that it can be heard, understood, and appropriated.

Books

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