



Preaching Backwards

Old Dogs Must Learn New Tricks

A Travel Free Learning Article

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1968 is a hinge point in American history and in the history of the American church. I think of the decades before 1968 as being *modern*, while the years after 1968 are better described as *post-modern*. It's not that there is a total disconnect between pre- and post- 1968. Some things—well a few things—have gone on much the same after 1968, but there are so many things that have changed since 1968 that post-1968 can justifiably be thought of as a new and separate era.

Many churches in North America were either started or reshaped by and for the Silent and Builder generations (born between 1915 and 1945) during the 20 years or so before 1968. Thus they bear the marks of the modern era. Many of us doing ministry today were brought up in these same congregations and were taught how to do ministry by members of the Silent and Builder generations. This means that for ministry today, *modern* is our default approach rather than *post-modern*.

As one of these old dogs—I'm an early Boomer—I had to learn and must continually learn new tricks: new ways of looking at the world, new ways of responding to the world, new ways of doing ministry and church. Let me give a few examples.

Preaching

Modern worshippers came for a thoughtful three point exposition of the Gospel, followed by a brief experiential example or two. "Three points and a poem", we used to say. This worked for many because modern people typically liked to think things through and then seek an experience to demonstrate what they had thought about. Post-moderns typically operate in exactly the opposite way: they seek an experience and then think through what it means after the fact. Thus preaching must begin with experience and move to an invitation to think about the meaning.

The modern preaching paradigm was predominantly deductive; the post-modern preaching paradigm is predominantly inductive. A television series that began in the 1970's, Columbo starring Peter Falk, was among the first to make this flip from deductive to inductive. Before Columbo television dramas often began with clues that led up to the discovery of who did it, or the experience. But Columbo began with the crime or the experience, and spent the rest of the hour figuring out who did it. Inductive preaching moves like Columbo: experience to reason rather than reason to experience. For moderns, preaching inductively feels like preaching backwards, but it flows just right for post-moderns.

Mission

Because the United States perceived itself to be predominantly Christian before 1968, the mission of the church was mostly thought of as two-fold: 1. to establish and maintain Christian institutions called congregations in every city and town of America, and 2. to export Christian faith overseas. The mantra was “we had it, they needed it, and ergo we sent it”. Thus, the 20th century saw the development of a huge overseas mission initiative that did indeed take the church to nearly every part of the globe. Since the assumption was that a good citizen is also a good Christian, every citizen was understood to be a Christian unless he or she declared themselves to be otherwise.

Thus congregations operated on an attractional model: “we will make ourselves attractive and people will come.” Before 1968 that worked pretty well with about half of the US population attending church regularly. After 1968, as the proportion of the population claiming to be Christian began shrinking, fewer people were attracted. Thus congregations shrank and many continue to shrink because they have not caught on to the fact that while maintaining a lovely institution was sufficient to draw a lot of people before 1968, after 1968 many people were becoming anti-institutional and thus what we today would call spiritual but not religious.

The primary mission field has shifted from overseas to right here in our neighborhood and city. Thus we moderns are having to learn some new tricks: to help our congregations become missional rather than attractional.

Governance

In pre-1968 times, moderns loved large boards and functional committees. These provided people an opportunity to participate in the church institutions that they loved. Post-moderns, on the other hand, avoid boards and committees like the plague unless they can see some direct connection with the mission of the congregation/church. The post-modern cry is, “give me a meaningful job to do and let me do it, but don’t make me join a committee!”

Volunteerism

Along the same line as governance, before 1968, since the institution was itself mostly the point, people were happy to volunteer for institutional maintenance jobs: folding bulletins, stapling newsletters, mowing the church grass. It is harder to find people under 70 who are willing to take on these kinds of tasks. People want jobs that participate directly in the mission and ministry of the congregation! People who won’t volunteer to serve on a committee will often quickly agree to serve in a missional role when they are recruited, equipped, empowered and provided with a clear line of accountability.

So, we old dogs have to learn new tricks. Or maybe we should say, “we experienced church leaders must continually learn new ways of doing things because so many things that used to work one way must now be done in the exact opposite way!” As the context for our work changes, so must the way we do our work. I confess this sometimes feels like trying to drive a car forward while looking backward. As a modern, my default assumptions and world view are modern. I must constantly remind myself I am living in the 21st century, not 1958.

A Closing Thought

Mentoring used to be something older people did for young people. Today, it is something old people must do for young people and young people must do for old people. We each have much to learn from the other and we must each be open to learning from each other.

Important Things to Know



Dick Hamm is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is also executive administrator for Christian Churches Together in the USA. His most recent book is ***Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Post-Modern Era***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a sharing knowledge emphasis of TCP. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.

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