

Preaching that connects with the next generation

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One of the challenges we have as preachers is to connect with all those sitting in our audiences. For many of us, our audience includes youth (children, teens and college-age young adults). Are we connecting with those youth when we preach?

This article presents some tips and ideas concerning how to connect with kids when we preach. I'm indebted for much of the information in this article to Jody Bowser who is a youth minister at the Chapel in Akron. Jody is currently completing a DMin degree in preaching—studying with Haddon Robinson, the dean of evangelical preachers. Jody presented much of this information in a seminar he conducted on November 11, 2002 in Akron, OH. He has given me permission to share this information with all of you.

Jesus commanded Peter: “feed my lambs” (John 21:15). While this command was specific to Peter’s ministry, all those who preach share Peter’s responsibility—to teach in ways that feed Jesus’ sheep—all his sheep. Doing so is no small challenge—particularly when the audience is diverse in educational level, socio-economic and ethnic background and in age.

Preachers fail to feed when they communicate in ways that don’t connect. Famous preacher Charles Spurgeon addressed this problem when he wrote, “Christ said, ‘Feed my sheep...feed my lambs.’ Some preachers, however, put the food so high that neither lambs nor sheep can reach it. They seem to have read the text [as], ‘Feed my giraffes.’”

We forget the lambs (the youth) in our flocks when we preach “over their heads.” We fail to connect with some of the adults in our congregations for the same reason. Let me in this article challenge and encourage you to carefully consider how your sermons connect (or don’t connect) with the kids in your congregation.

In particular, I want to urge you to keep the kids in mind as you prepare your sermons. You’ll be helped in doing so if you do what Haddon Robinson does when he meets with his “invisible congregation” as he prepares his sermons:

An effective way for preachers to connect with the audience is to mentally sit six or seven specific people around their desks as they prepare. I have assembled such a committee in my mind as real to me as if they were there. In that group sits a friend who is an outspoken cynic. As I think through my material, I sometimes can hear him sigh, “You’ve got to be kidding, Robinson. That’s pious junk food. What world are you living in?” Another is an older woman who is a simple believer, who takes preachers and preaching very seriously. While I prepare sermons, I ask, “Am I raising questions that will trouble her? Will my sermon help her?” A teenager sprawls in the circle, wondering how long I’m going to preach. I can make the sermon seem shorter if I can keep him interested.

From *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, p. 20, 21

Robinson goes on to describe other members of his “invisible congregation”—a divorced mother, an unbeliever not familiar with religious jargon and an African-American who is

not comfortable in a white church. The point Robinson makes is essential—we have to know something about all those we’re preaching to if we are going to connect with all members in our audience. The need for such awareness is particularly acute when it comes to our kids.

So, what do we need to know about kids in order to connect with them in our preaching? Fortunately, we don’t have to have a degree in child development. Nevertheless, some things are essential to know:

1. Youths generally have shorter attention spans than adults do. This is a developmental issue as well as a cultural issue. You may wish it were otherwise, but it is what it is—and so to connect with them, we have to be sure we are not asking them to concentrate for longer periods than they are able. To connect with kids thus means shorter sermons for some preachers—but what it means for all of us is that our sermons need to keep moving and to change pace frequently. Rick Warren, pastor at Saddleback Community Church in Irvine, CA knows this. Though his sermons routinely last at least 45 minutes, he divides them up into 15 minute “mini-sermons” so that the audience is given a change of pace several times during the sermon. This strategy works well for both kids and adults.
2. Youths are relationally based learners. Many of us who are preachers grew up in the 50’s and 60’s (and some before that). By virtue of our upbringing, we’re used to absorbing facts through lecture style teaching. Kids today have not been taught at school that way. Moreover, by virtue of being young, they tend to emphasize relationships over facts. So in our preaching, we need to connect relationally—not simply impart facts. Jesus is a marvelous model in this regard—note his “sermons”—how he did not lecture, but gave lots of real-life, relational illustrations (stories). He taught with stories about people in real life situations. Through these stories, Jesus imparted important information, but his sermons were not lectures.
3. Youths are energetic and learn best from an energetic preacher. Some of us, frankly, need to “kick it up” a few notches if we want to connect with the kids. A speaker with a lack of enthusiasm and passion is often labeled as “boring” by kids. That energy can be expressed in many ways—moving around at the lectern (rather than standing still like a statue), vocal variety (but don’t shout at them either), lots of gestures and other expressions of enthusiasm that convey to the audience that you care deeply and passionately about your message. Such passion engages kids and draws them into the message.
4. Youths will listen to a speaker who directly addresses them. Often preachers seem to completely ignore the youth in an audience. I say “seem” because they may care in their heart—it’s just that the concern of their heart may not come across their lips. So how do you let the kids know you acknowledge their presence and that you care about them? One of the ways is to address their concerns and needs in the illustrations you use. Are all your sermon illustrations related to adult concerns and adult lives? Or do you frequently address the issues that kids are thinking about?

Knute Larson, pastor of the Chapel in Akron works to be sure that he addresses an issue unique to the kids at least once in every sermon. Kids' know he cares about them because of this and other means he uses to show them he is aware of their concerns and needs.

5. Youths love humor (as do most adults). Don't overdo it, but keep things light, and joyful, have some fun and they will too. I find that kids love it when I make fun of myself. It helps them relax—and that's crucial, because kids won't receive any teaching from you until they are relaxed in your presence. Humor is also a great attention-getter. I often purposefully inject humor at points I think the audience's energy and attention is waning. Humor wakes them up and draws them back into the message.
6. Youths appreciate creativity. Are all of your sermons basically the same? Same organizational structure. Same rhythm. Same emotional intensity (or lack there of). Same topics. Same old, same old. For kids, "same" is spelled "b-o-r-i-n-g." So try different approaches to your sermons. How about a first-person narrative (you pretend you're a biblical character and then tell your story in the first person). Over the years, I've been Moses, Paul, Timothy and Jeremiah in my sermons. The possibilities are endless. And how cool would it be to be a character and then have some kids join you in the sermon as other characters in the story? There are many ways to approach sermons—try out some new ones and see if the kid's ears don't perk up.
7. Teens (especially the older ones) appreciate an inductive style of preaching. Older teens will tell you that the movies that hold their attention the most are the ones where they don't know the end of the movie at the beginning. Inductive preaching follows a similar pattern by waiting until the end or near the end of the sermon to reveal the “bottom line” of the message. Such an approach keeps the audience engaged—moving down the path of thought development with the speaker with a few surprises and “plot twists” along the way. As the message unfolds, the audience may think they know where you're headed, but just like in the movies, the plot takes various unexpected twists and turns as new characters or ideas are introduced.
8. Youths love music—it's one of their primary languages. I would hasten to add that they love “their” music. I get a kick out of adults who talk about “contemporary” worship music and then play music that is based on musical forms out of the 50's and 60's. I grew up on the Beach Boys and Beatles so this stuff works for me. But it doesn't work so well with many of today's teens.

What's music got to do with preaching? Simply this—music is a language that can be used in preaching too. I frequently use the lyrics from songs that are popular with the kids to illustrate a point or raise an issue I want to address in my sermon. With all the Internet sites that post such lyrics, it doesn't take long to find them.

Another idea is to ask the kids to write out the lyrics to the most popular songs that kids at school are listening to—then quote those lyrics in a sermon (caution: don't bash the lyrics, simply use them to illustrate what's on the mind of kids these

days). I find that many of the currently popular songs speak of the longing kids have for love, for significance, for people who are “real” (not phony), etc.). The gospel speaks powerfully to all of these longings.

9. Youths like to be asked. I find that some preachers don’t show much respect for kids—for their individuality and their ability. One of the ways to show kids that they matter to you is to ask them rather than telling them. This works well in sermons. Rather than simply stating a truth categorically (“believe me, I’m the adult here”), ask questions—give them the opportunity to reason through the issue with you. This inductive/exploratory way of “discovering” truth is quite effective with kids—it engages their minds and shows you think they are capable of thinking too. Note how Jesus often asked questions of his audience—he’s a great example for us in this regard.
10. Youths like to be involved. Asking questions is one way to involve them but there are others. Why not arrange for the youth to do a short skit to illustrate one of your sermon points? Or why not take their skit and then wrap your sermon around the topic they choose. Have some youth give testimonies during one of your sermons, or read a scripture or read a story. Look for ways to involve them—keep them active and you’ll find them moving from the back row where they can sleep to the front row where they can get in on the action.
11. Youths are hungry for relevance. As part of his doctoral thesis, Jody Bowser from the Chapel in Akron conducted surveys with hundreds of teens in churches throughout the United States. In those interviews, he got some “straight talk” from teens concerning what they do like and don’t like from preachers. One of the things they frequently mentioned that they like is when the sermon topic was something they related to. One teen said this: “The topic of the sermon is very important. I immediately ask myself, ‘do I really care about this?’”
12. Youths will listen more intently to those they know care about them as people. Your best preparation for communicating with the kids in your congregation will be in time spent with them—showing them in tangible ways that you care. One of the ways I try to do this when I’m a visiting preacher is to spend some time with the kids before church—meeting them, talking with them. I find that when I do that they pay a lot more attention when I go to preach. And then my sermon has to keep that attention. When kids know we care, we’ve earned the right to be heard. And, by the way, don’t assume you know what kids are thinking, or what’s important to them. It never hurts to ask. When’s the last time you asked a group of teens what they’d like to hear covered in your next sermon? Their answers might surprise and inspire you.

So those are some tips of things to do to connect in your preaching with the kids. Now let’s switch gears a bit and ask what doesn’t work with kids in our preaching? Here are some of the things that turn them off:

1. Preachers who are melodramatic. Teens in particular are turned off by those who are faking it or who over-do it. So be real, open, transparent. Be yourself.

2. Preachers who use a lot of religious jargon. So use real-life language when you preach. One teen had this to say when they were interviewed:

I cannot emphasize how important the need to avoid “Christianese” is. This is crucial. Huge. Imagine a sermon about atonement and the cross with the speaker never using the words “sin,” “sacrifice,” “redeem,” “reconciliation,” “justify,” “righteous,” “holy,” etc. How effective would it be! Those words are dripping with theology and meaning and truth, but because they are such huge words, people don’t stop to think about what they mean.”

There may be times when you’ll want to use some of these biblical terms—but always be sure to explain them and define them with words they know and using concepts they can relate to. Again, stories and other illustrations are very helpful. “But I don’t know many stories” you might be thinking. That may be true, but there are many resources available to help you. I’ve found the book “Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks” published by Zondervan and Youth Specialties to be great sources of stories and other illustrations (they now publish several volumes and have a CD version that simplifies the search process).

3. Youth don’t tend to relate well to religious sounding tones of voice. This is particularly true when we pray. To connect with kids, it’s best to preach and pray using conversational voice patterns and words. Remember to be passionate, but don’t be phony or religious sounding. Remember, our words are meant to reach them where they are—not make them adapt to us.

4. Teens and young adults in our culture have “radars” that are quite sensitive to overstatements and exaggerations. So be careful of using grand, sweeping statements that you don’t (or can’t) substantiate. Speak what is true, and don’t overstate your case. They will be more likely to receive your teaching if you stick to what is real and what is clearly supported by Scripture.

5. You lose the youth in your audience when it’s not clear where you are and where you’re headed in your sermon. The best preachers invariably use a simple organizational structure (even when preaching using an inductive approach). Try this sometime: ask a fifth grader who hears your sermon what you preached about. If they don’t have a clue, you probably were not clear in your preaching. The key here is to keep it simple—repeat key phrases, have clear and obvious transitions between points, recapitulate and rephrase.

Don’t be boringly and un-creatively over-simple, but do be clear and easy to follow. I find it’s often helpful to summarize key points in an acronym that’s easy to follow and remember. For example, I give a sermon on prayer with points summarized in the acronym P.R.A.Y. that stands for praise, repent, ask and yield.

Alliteration also works well. For example, the story of Joseph can be summarized with words all beginning in “P” where Joseph goes from the pit, to Potiphar’s house, to prison, to Pharaoh’s palace and finally to the promised land (your life ever have such ups and downs? have hope, God is in charge).

Sometimes our sermons are like lectures with no structure—more like a talk that begins, drones on and finally (thank God!) ends. And along the way, there’s no structure, no rhythm, no emotional depth or development—no real communication. Some adults will sit through such sermons. But kids will tune you out.

6. You lose the youth in your audience when you begin to repeat yourself. Kids tend to be pretty smart. You don’t need to constantly be circling back and repeating what’s already been said. Some repetition is good, but don’t do too much. Sometimes we repeat simply to fill the time. Let me give you a suggestion the kids will appreciate—say it once and then sit down.
7. Youths (particularly teens) are hypersensitive about adults “talking down” to them. You do want to avoid using words they don’t understand. But don’t “dumb down” the sermon—such an approach can backfire with youth. I find our youth are engaged, stimulated and encouraged when they are challenged—when they are asked to think deeply about important issues of real life. I find them anxious to hear the gospel—the life-transforming message about Jesus and about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Kids are hungry, I find, for truth that transforms—particularly when they are shown how that truth relates to their real lives. So give them the straight gospel—take them to the cross, and challenge them—but use their language, connect with their culture and relate the message to their real lives.
8. Youths can spot a phony. With all of these suggestions about improving your preaching, be reminded that you have to be who you are when you preach—you have to be natural and relaxed. It’s good to stretch yourself, but stay “within yourself.” If you try to preach based on some sort of formula, you may come across as unnatural and “stiff.” So be yourself, use your own unique gifts and strengths, and don’t hesitate to experiment a bit. You may have more to use than you know.

In his survey concerning preaching, Jody had groups of teens listen to two sermons, then compare, and contrast those sermons in response to several questions. Following are some snippets of their review comments. Note how the comments reflect what we’ve just reviewed about what connects with kids and what doesn’t.

1. *What made one sermon more “likeable” than the other?*
 - “The energy with which it was preached.”
 - “An appealing voice with clear diction.”
 - “New biblical information and from a new perspective, “I enjoyed being taken on a ‘scripture hunt.’”
 - “The point of the sermon was applied to my everyday life.”
 - “Preacher A was very passionate about what he was preaching about, preacher B sounded bored.”
 - “Preacher A had more illustrations, stories and humor...and his sermon seemed shorter.”
 - “Preacher A seemed more enthusiastic...and more human.”
 - “I’ve known Preacher A for a long time, and I respect him.”

2. *Was there anything that stood out to you about either sermon?*
 - “Preacher A messed up more in the sermon, but at the same time he seemed very wise...so it helped him in that it made him seem real, like one of us speaking from experience.”
 - “Preacher A used practical ideas everyone would know to introduce the topic...and then used good comparisons for his scripture passage.”
 - “Preacher A just seemed more prepared.”
 - “Preacher A brought me into his sermon.”

3. *What did the “better” sermon do that was better?*
 - “The use of illustrations and humor to give the sermon a conversational tone.”
 - “The better sermon had more stories and anecdotes...it kept me entertained.”
 - “The better sermon held my attention. I was able to identify and connect with the pastor.”
 - “What I thought was better about Sermon A was that the preacher sounded very passionate about his sermon.”
 - “Preacher A easily related to the listeners...and was entertaining.”

4. *What did the “worse” sermon do that was worse?*
 - “Preacher B read off the Bible, and gave no brief explanations.”
 - “It seemed as if Preacher B tried a little too hard sometimes, and joked with the audience probably because he knew they were wandering off...and he was trying to get them back.”
 - “Preacher B sounded very bored and that just made my mind wander.”
 - “Preacher B gave me no illustrations to hold onto, and seemed removed from the congregation.”
 - “Sermon B didn’t have many stories, and had too many Bible verses rather than stories to illustrate.”
 - “Preacher B was too ‘preachy.’ Thank goodness he didn’t talk with ‘thee’s’ and ‘thou’s.’”

5. *Any thoughts about how preachers can do a better job of getting their ideas across to High School students?*
 - “Just making sure to relate to students. Keep the sermon within a reasonable time frame. Do stuff with students throughout the week, building relationships, and thus the students are more likely to listen.”
 - “Make sure to get them a Bible, and make them realize what they have.”
 - “Use examples a lot. This helps us to concentrate, and it keeps our attention...and we learn more.”
 - “To get an idea out to high school students, preachers should focus on: 1) Comical stories, 2) Jesus Christ, and 3) love.”
 - “Know what you believe and take stands on tough issues. Please. Everyone at school and in modern culture takes stands on issues. Don’t sidestep abortion, or women’s rights, or creation vs. evolution vs. creative evolution. We need direction. Don’t let us get it only from Stone Phillips and MTV.”

Our calling and challenge is to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the next generation. Preaching is a primary means for such communication—but only preaching that connects with kids will get the job done. Therefore, in this article I've challenged us all to evaluate our preaching styles and content. My prayer is that you will find help in this challenge and that it will lead to positive change in your preaching ministry. The kids will appreciate it—and most adults will like it too.