

Ministry / Cameron Cole

6 THINGS WE NEED TO LEARN FROM YOUTH ABOUT PREACHING

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Rarely seen, never heard is how many churches prefer to treat teenagers, confined to separate ministries. But I also know of a traditional church where teenagers sat front and center each week. It's no coincidence the senior pastor had been a youth minister and often addressed those teens specifically.

If we're serious about passing the gospel to the next generation, what do we need to learn from youth about how we preach? Here are six suggestions youth would offer to their pastors.

1. We don't know what sanctification means, but we know about the process of growing in grace.

I'm a word person. I majored in Latin and English and enjoyed SAT prep vocabulary flashcards. (Yes, I was a really cool kid.) I like big words, especially in the realm of theology. A mentor listened to a talk I gave to students and had a list of about seven theological terms the kids probably did not know. Kids mentally check out when

they hear abundant, arcane jargon and the presumption that everyone knows what it means. Students need to learn how to define terms like justification, sanctification, imputation, and substitutionary atonement. Preachers should not shy away from using Christian terminology, but they should make sure to explain the terms in a way that is not condescending toward those who do not know it.

2. If you are personally vulnerable, we will listen to what you have to say.

In homiletics, many debate the level of vulnerability pastors should exercise. If you share too much, you risk sounding self-absorbed. If you never share any personal stories, you may appear aloof. Regardless, I can say with confidence that teenagers of this generation embrace people with a willingness to share their story, particularly those parts that reveal the preacher is an imperfect person with whom students can identify.

3. We can't hear you when you're yelling.

One week in Sunday school we discussed how we relate and minister to those of other religions. I showed video from a cable news network debate about whether Christians should participate in a certain exercise. The program featured a conservative pastor, with a penchant for yelling, and a somewhat liberal pastor with a mellow demeanor. Before showing the video I asked students about their view on the topic. For the most part, they sided with the conservative preacher. However, after showing the video, most said they agreed with the liberal preacher. Upon further cross-examination, the students admitted that they generally would reject what the yelling preacher had to say because of his tone and volume. Meanwhile, they would be inclined to agree with and embrace a person with a calm, gentle, controlled tone.

Keep in mind that we get yelled at more as teenagers than any other season in life. Whether it is their parents, their football coach,

or the store-owner at the mall, teenagers receive much static from adults (and sometimes provoke it). They naturally reject a strident voice without even considering the validity of the statements, while they give a “nice” tone the benefit of the doubt.

4. Sometimes you talk as if we are not in the room.

Kids often say they feel as if the sermon exclusively addresses the adults in sanctuary. But the truth of God's Word and the gospel have universal relevance and applications, regardless of the age or context of the audience. Rarely, though, when listening to sermons online or in person do I hear a preacher make life-application examples that appeal to adolescents. Usually, pastors evoke examples related to adult matters, such as financial insecurity, marital conflict, job loss, anxiety over children, and so on. A pastor can win serious rapport with his teenage audience by using a life-application example that relates to teenage experience, such as the stress of exams, conflict with parents, or fear about seating arrangements on the first day of school.

5. We are all postmodern, unlike many of our pastors.

The greatest disconnect I see between older pastors and the teens in their pews relates to the massive difference in cultural worldview under which they have been socialized. Many pastors (including me) were raised with a modernist mindset. We moderns think in terms of evidence, logic, and proofs. The evidences of the resurrection along with some Josh McDowell sold me on Christianity.

The teenagers to whom I minister do not think like most of my preacher friends. While volumes can (and have) been written about the difference between postmodern teens and their modernist neighbors, I would say simply that pastors must engage the postmodern kid in heart and mind. Biblical exegesis and doctrine alone edify and feed me. For postmodern teens, they need stories and questions that appeal to experience and emotions and that illustrate the biblical truth being proclaimed.

6. Tell me how this affects me right now.

Instant gratification may be the worst trend in this generation of teenagers. They evaluate everything on how it immediately affects them. By contrast, most pastors grew up in a world where we had to wait for mom and dad to take us to the movies (or the movie store) to watch a flick. We had to wait our turn to use the phone. Not these kids. They can watch a movie . . . on their phone. They can dial up whatever they want on demand. While this trend has deleterious effects on teens, we cannot ignore their context. Insane it may sound, but offering teenagers salvation and eternal life when they die does not hardly resonate with them. To connect to their teenage constituency, pastors also must explain the realized benefits we enjoy in this life from following Jesus in addition to the deferred ones we enjoy upon death.

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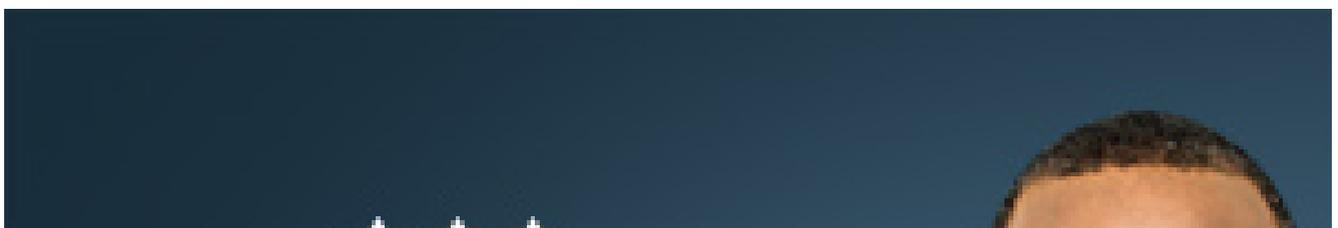
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