

## Beyond Babble: Engaging the Culture in Witness by Mike Zehnder

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“What is this babbler trying to say?”

The apostle Paul, the greatest apologist of the faith next to Jesus Christ, was no “babbler”—irrelevant, ignorant and out of touch. But he was called one (Acts. 17:18).

Never one to wither under criticism, Paul simply sharpened his speech. “It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously” (Acts 17:22). So began his famous sermon on Mars Hill, the prime council’s sacred meeting place in Athens. Paul had done his research – he knew their passions and values. He even found a way to make his opening remarks sound complimentary, just as a traveling politician might butter up his audience with, “It’s so good to be here in this great city of \_\_\_\_.”

Paul continues, “I was going through your city and looking closely at the objects you worship.” Successful evangelists know that nothing opens the door for sharing truth like being first willing to respectfully listen and observe. Listening communicates that you value the person even if you disagree with his conclusions.

But for Paul, this wasn’t a matter of just showing an interest in their false objects of worship. He used his knowledge of their idolatry as a foil to talk about true worship and what God had done for them through Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul knew how to **engage the culture**. Even if his audience disagreed with his message they could no longer dismiss him as irrelevant or “babbling.” **Using knowledge they prized to pique their interest in more valuable knowledge—that was Paul’s Spirit-inspired communication device to proclaim the Gospel.**

Some say all we need to do in proclaiming the Gospel is to be faithful. They reject device, technique or technology. “Don’t be topical; just be theological and pericopal.” “Avoid anything that smacks of a culture bent on amusing itself and just stick to the plain truth.”

If Paul had “just stuck to the plain truth” he would not have begun his message with a review of cultural icons. But he knew his audience was full of Epicureans and Stoics. These smart people had competing philosophies on how best to acquire “the good life,” but despite differing conclusions, their pursuit was the same: “How can I be happy?”

Athenian culture, like ours, thrived on pursuing happiness. Whether the pursuit is through possessions, fame, beauty, money, lust or chemicals isn’t important – the act of pursuing pleasure is king. “I want it, I want it all and I want it now” is American culture’s highest value.

Perfect. It’s an ideal climate for the Gospel when a culture is hell-bent on pleasuring itself. If Paul were preaching or leading worship in your church this weekend, he just might engage your pleasure-obsessed culture with, “I see that you people here in this beautiful city of \_\_\_\_ really know how to have a good time,” noting your city’s TV shows, pleasures and values and then proceed to tell you how you can have the BEST time, now and forever.

In other words, Paul would first grab his listeners' attention discussing something important to them in an understandable way. As he said in 1 Cor. 14:9 (GWT) “If you don’t speak in a way that can be understood, how will anyone know what you’re saying? You will be talking into thin

air.” Good communicators use plain language. They start with familiar things in order to bridge listeners into unfamiliar territory: from an unknown god to the one true God, from the sign of a red overcast sky to the signs that we are in the Last Days, to name a Biblical few.

In our day we can start with 9/11 to get to Armageddon or Judgment Day; from a sports victory to victory over sin, death and hell; from kidnapping news to the concept that we are “in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” When we engage the culture, using connections like these and the additional suggestions in the accompanying article on page 3, we are bridging from the familiar to the revealed mysteries of a God who, through His undeserved kindness and mercy, sent His one and only Son to save us. ■

### Engaging Culture: Today’s Headlines by Mike Zehnder

As I write, Anna Nicole Smith died just two days ago. I can hardly believe the press. It’s ridiculous. What has she ever done but look pretty and apparently break a number of commandments Christians hold sacred? FOX news just called Anna Nicole and Marilyn Monroe American icons. Icons!

As preacher, worship leader, prayer leader, should I just go with the themes for the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Quasimodo or should I allow this kind of interruption from *this* kind of woman? Oh yes, I should allow it. In fact, I’m happy for it! Engaging the culture means I am on the *lookout* for interruptions like these.

I start to hear the Spirit whispering how to use this situation for good. I could start my sermon, my prayer, my Bible study, my focus thought as a worship leader with a reference to this icon. “I see you have many gods, beautiful icons like Anna Nicole and Marilyn.”

I could reference a hundred other things that people see as beautiful from a work of art to some feat of athletic prowess. Now I can segue into Psalm 27:4 on “the beauty of the Lord” and explain why God is the ultimate beauty par excellence. Or talk about how David just longed to wake up from the grave and see the Lord’s beautiful face. I can contrast the beauty that leads to death with the beauty that leads to life. I can note that the devil’s tricks remain the same; in the Garden and also now, “the fruit looked good.”

Engaging the culture isn’t for those who are asleep at the wheel of ministry. It’s for those who are willing to “read the signs” of the culture and by the Spirit’s help and application engage the culture by the power of the Spirit and the Word of God just as we pray every week: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” ■

### Seven Ways to Engage the Culture By Mike Zehnder

As a companion piece to part 1, "Beyond Babble: Engaging the Culture in Worship," these ideas may be helpful both to pastors, teachers and worship leaders who address the “crowd” in worship, as well as to lay individuals who address the neighbor, the co-worker, the gym buddy, the relative.

#### **1. Watch more TV and movies.**

I’m not advocating couch-potatoism or assimilation of cultural values. But how can you address the culture without knowing what else is addressing the culture? A Christian who prides himself

on watching almost no TV is saying, “I can witness to you without first listening to you or knowing anything about you.”

## **2. Watch less TV and movies.**

Aw, shucks. Just when you thought I might help you prove to your spouse that you NEED that big screen TV. What I’m getting at here is that you can’t address your culture until you know how God has already addressed it. Pull away from the tube and “Let the Word of Christ dwell richly in you.” People make time for their favorite shows. Make time for your favorite Book and the TV shows will serve to identify where to apply God’s Law and Gospel.

## **3. Pay more attention to TV and movies.**

Don’t just watch and absorb. Analyze! Ask yourself: what is true and valuable according to the plot line? What do the commercials say we must have for happiness? What do the Epicureans and Stoics of 21<sup>st</sup> century media hold as valuable? What is our culture telling us is the road to happiness? How does this “knowledge” stand up to God’s Word?

## **4. It’s a digital world. Go for it.**

About a dozen years ago I found myself trying to convince a church it needed a fax machine. Five years later I found myself trying to convince a church it needed a website and email. A few years later I was trying to explain why a church needed a screen, projector and PowerPoint. Today, churches are making worship podcasts and more. To ignore digital tools for the Gospel would be like Luther ignoring Gutenberg’s printing press. Can you say “gigabyte”?

## **5. It’s a digital world. Budget for it.**

See #4. You need hardware. You need software. You need equipment that didn’t even exist five years ago. This isn’t about whiz-bang. It’s about impact. Sure, you can have impact without whiz-bang. Especially in 1950. But in 2007, gadgets that use electricity can be helpful in communicating the Gospel in visual ways. Consider our culture: 65% of people are visual learners, 30% are auditory learners and 5% are kinesthetic learners. Isn’t it great that now in one worship service we can easily communicate the Gospel in all three ways that people are wired to receive it?

## **6. It’s a digital world. Staff for it.**

You need personnel, ministry teams, people with creative ideas. You need brainstorming sessions on how to present the theme in memorable ways. The good news is that you don’t have to do it all yourself. In fact, you don’t have to do any of it or even know how to do it. The cool thing is that there are people in your church, teenagers included, who love this stuff and are good at it. Give your team the theme and any ideas you may have and let them run with it. Think of the digital needs of a church as a modern day “Altar Guild” where many hands are needed and where many can serve in the ministry of “preparation for worship.” Just keep this in mind to stay grounded: the medium is not the message; it only supports it. When worship and technology touch, the challenge is to use technology solely for the praise and glory of Jesus Christ. But you have to start using it before you can rise to that challenge.

## **7. Music. We love it. All kindS.**

Notice how many buttonS you have on your radio dial to save your favoriteS. Why the funny S’s? Repeat Paul’s words after me, slowly and distinctly: “I will become all things to all people in

order that I might win some.” The more buttons on your church worship-style dial, the more listeners will tune in to hear what you have to say.

Be heard. Engage your culture. And that’s no babble. ■