

Common Ground

Dear Justin,

What has been the greatest change in the church in the last ten years? What are those things that remain constant? These are the questions I'm most frequently asked by friends. The reason they ask is that a decade ago I left the pastoral life for a fast-paced global teaching ministry. But now I have returned to parish ministry, and they want to know *what has changed*.

Some expect me to say something like, *the continued decay of absolute truth, the evaporation of discretionary time, a growing unwillingness on people's part to make long-term commitments, or ye ole faithful, the continuing challenge of ministry in a post-Christian, post-modern milieu.*

Others are convinced the biggest change is the area of church music—the conveyer belt of what is contemporary continuing to roll into the future. It is humorous that fifty-year-olds are now arguing to keep the music they fought to get twenty years ago. The now thirty-something's will do the same in two decades.

These all are true changes, Justin, but I think they pale in comparison to the biggest change. The biggest change is the colossus of communication and its related partner, technology.

Presently I am the senior pastor of a congregation with eight pastoral staff, and I have no secretary. In fact, there are only two secretaries for the entire

church. Twenty years ago, I was the only pastor in a church of 150, and I had a full-time personal secretary. In the past nine months, I have written zero letters and a thousand e-mails. My secretary is the Palm Pilot; I communicate to the elders and many church members via e-mail. I must have my sermon outline complete by Thursday noon for our computer tech to prepare the media presentation for Sunday. And our church, like so many others, displays its philosophy of ministry, specific services and discipleship resources on our Web site. Yes, technology has changed communication and in many ways improved it.

However, within this expanding area of communication and technology, the greatest challenge of change is in those minutes I stand to speak before the congregation—that vital communication we call the sermon.

Are you aware that the word *communication* comes from the Latin *communis*, meaning *to have in common*. Therefore, even in our preparing to preach, we must start from *common ground* when attempting to reach others.

The first common ground is a common language, in our case, English. Twenty years ago a pastor could assume his hearers possessed some information about the Bible. Today, however, *the common ground of culture* far overshadows that of the church and its biblical worldview. We can lament this fact, but what's the point? So let's view the common ground of culture as an ally in presenting the Gospel.

When I prepare the Sunday message, I must ask, *what is the common ground?* I know that most of my hearers will know a popular movie actor, but will have almost zero knowledge of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who

did much to form a Christian view of man's immaterial nature. This past Sunday I quoted both an actor and Kierkegaard.

The common ground for communication then must be both popular culture and biblical history. Thus the backdrop of my presentations is very different. Ten years ago, I may have started a message on self-sacrifice based on Luke 9:23-25 with an illustration from the life of Jesus or my own life. I still would do that from time to time, but now I have new weapons in my arsenal. With the advent of media tools, we can launch out and find interesting starting points for communication. I started a recent sermon with a slide of Salvador Dali's *The Metaphorisis of Narcissus* and told the story of this Greek tragedy. It powerfully illustrated the futility of a selfish life. The people to whom I preach are not ignorant; in fact, they are highly educated in art, literature, and music. But many lack biblical background. I try to find common ground as a starting point of teaching them the Bible.

What has not changed, Justin, is the truth of Scripture. In fact, Bible sales are up and so is the interest in this ancient book. The smartest marketing technique any pastor could choose is simply to teach the Scriptures in a clear and interesting manner. So don't be afraid of history and important biblical words. Take time to explain them to the people. But remember to start where they are, and bridge them to the reality of the message in the text.

What also hasn't changed is that people still need to be encouraged, exhorted, comforted and confronted. What hasn't changed is the basic nature of people and their needs. What hasn't changed is the supernatural nature of a

person filled with the Holy Spirit explaining the truth about God, the world and ourselves. If anything has changed at all in this regard, it is that people are hungry for the truth *straight up*. They yearn for authenticity, vulnerability and a person willing to *shoot straight* with understanding and wisdom. I find the more I teach the Scriptures in a clear and interesting way—the more they come and the more they want.

So, dear friend, give them some contemporary connecting points, and then lay some Kierkegaard on them. Find some common ground amidst their changing world—they will love it.

Yours in Him,

Bill Hull

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*Let your conversation be always full of grace,
seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

Colossians 4:6