

**Experience Preaching:
How the 'Blue Man' Influences
the Development and Delivery of Sermons**

By Rod Casey

"How was your trip to Denver?" asked Bill as he stepped out of his car. "Did you learn anything new?"

"What I learned definitely affirmed the things I was already thinking. It's a new day for church leaders; that's for sure," responded Greg as they stepped into the diner at the corner of Fourth and Broadway that had become their classroom over the past few months.

Greg and Bill had related casually through the quarterly luncheon of an evangelical pastors' fellowship. Greg McGinnis was the pastor of New Community Church, a congregation located near the heart of the city. Before becoming the lead pastor of New Community, Greg had served as Minister of Adult Education for that same congregation. After the previous pastor died unexpectedly of an aneurysm, Greg began the difficult process of successfully transitioning from being an Associate Pastor to his current role as Lead Pastor. He had been at his new post for the past eight years.

Though both had just passed the age of forty, Bill was a newcomer to ministry life. He made a career shift in his mid-thirties, attending seminary and serving a denominational internship before accepting his current call as the senior pastor of Heartland Baptist Church, situated in a suburban neighborhood on a busy street, just two and a half years ago. The conversation that morning began as soon as they stepped out their cars. Greg had just returned from a church leadership conference in Colorado.

As they took their seats at the corner booth and picked up a menu to order breakfast, anxious to hear more about the trip Bill said, "Go on, tell me more."

"The authors of *The Experience Economy*¹ were there as guest speakers. This book was the first to help me begin to verbalize some of the principles we've been discussing. It was written to help companies realize that customer expectations are different than they have been in the past. These authors suggest that people want and expect 'ing' in the events and activities of their daily lives," Greg stated.

"Whoa! Back up and try again," said Bill. "They want to what?"

"I said they want to 'ing' the activities and events of their lives. Authors Joe Pine and Jim Gilmore note that for pleasure, people do 'ing' things like skiing, skating, hunting and camping. They propose that in ever-increasing ways people want and expect the daily purchases and routines of their lives to be 'ing-ed' by having an experience that engages the senses and builds a theme around the sale or service offered, as well as providing a quality product.² Companies that get it, understand that their customers want 'ing'. They want a driving experience. They want a shopping experience. They want a dining experience. Their furniture purchasing includes a sitting experience. Successful companies 'ing' their product or service," Greg continued.

"Churches that understand adult learning needs will do more than 'teach truth.' They will create "learning" experiences. They will develop what I call 'experience

¹ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), ix – xii.

² Leonard Sweet, *Post-modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 36-37.

preaching.’ Experience preaching is participatory and image-rich. It might involve movement, discussion, food and activities.”

"Maybe the best way to explain the idea of *experience preaching* is with an illustration that the authors used during a workshop I attended last week," said Greg. "When our grandmothers wanted to celebrate our parents’ birthdays, they gathered commodities like flour, eggs and sugar and baked a birthday cake. Our parents celebrated our birthdays with the purchase of goods. They bought a cake in a box, thanks to someone named Betty Crocker, along with canned icing and topped it with sprinkles. Along the way the economy graduated to services and birthday cakes could be bought already made at Kroger's or, better yet, Baskin Robbins. Are you still with me, Bill?"

"I am. Commodities, goods and services are the labels to describe the progression of economic value. In each instance the price for the consumer increased dramatically. But the offering was relevant to the customer’s needs and expectations and therefore, the consumer was willing to pay it. Is the next economic offering ‘experiences?’" guessed Bill.

"Yes. Pine and Gilmore say that the present economy is one of experiences. As parents today we tend to buy a birthday experience. Is that not the case?" asked Greg.

"My wife and I do it all the time," said Bill as his eyes brightened, revealing his enthusiasm. "Because my kids are young, we buy our birthday experiences at Chuck E. Cheese’s on North Market Street. They provide the cake, an energetic hostess and a large indoor playground. My wife writes the check and the best part of all, we leave the clean up with them."

"Even if it costs more?" questioned Greg.

"Our time is valuable and our kids are worth it. I get it! McDonald's has 'ing-ed' my child's birthday. They have provided a lot more than fast food. They have offered a birthday party experience. And, my wife and I are willing to pay a premium price for that experiential environment for our children's birthday parties, aren't we? After a pause that seemed to last several minutes Bill concluded, "The environment in which we preach might be impacted by this cultural phenomenon, you know."

"No kidding!" said Greg sarcastically. "Another example is this cup of coffee we're drinking. Do you think we're paying only for the commodity of the coffee beans and the privilege of someone fixing it for us? We're paying a premium price for the experience of sitting in a corner booth with memorabilia leftover from the hippie generation hanging on the walls around us."

"You're not suggesting a cover charge for hearing our sermons, are you?" inquired Bill. "I don't think the deacons will go for that."

"Just hang on. I'll get to the implications for preaching soon. But before we get to that, give me a chance to explain something Pine and Gilmore present in their materials. They call it the 'realms of experience.' Simply put, there are continua of experiential involvement.³ Here's a question to introduce this concept. Is the audience participant merely observing and passive in the experience happening, such as would be true if one were merely watching TV, or is the participant in some way immersed and active in the experience, becoming a factor in the experience's outcome? Most preaching is strictly lecture, little, if any attention is given to environmental factors that contemporary sermon hearers have grown accustomed to in culture. The expectations of

³ Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 29-31.

an emerging generation of sermon hearers are that they will be immersed and active in the things to which they give themselves to, whether it is for purposes of entertainment or self-improvement or discipleship. To each environment there are varying degrees of audience involvement or 'realms of experience.' 'The Blue Man Group' is an example from theater of an audience that is active and immersed in the experience created. Their unique mix of experiential art and music is creating a stir in pop culture."

"Are those the guys whose head and hands are covered with blue stuff and beat the large drums?" interrupted Bill. "I've seen them on Jay Leno."

"Yep. That's them," replied Greg. "I think attending one of their performances should be mandatory for every preacher. Their show has a message, yet words are never spoken throughout the entire performance by the primary communicators. The 'blue men' come into the audience and choose people to come on stage and help determine that show's unique shape. Interruptions are fodder for communication, albeit non-verbal, and welcomed as opportunities for building community among the audience guests. It's a lesson in creative communication. In an image-driven culture, it's a tutorial preachers should not easily dismiss. I can't possibly do the show justice by describing it; you really must 'experience' it!"

"It certainly sounds like it," said Bill. "But until I do, can you give me some idea of your thinking on the implications of *experiential environments* on preaching for a new generation of adult learners?"

"Well, I'll try. But first let me paint my face blue for full effect," joked Greg.

"Actually, I just need to take a quick break. I'll be right back."

When Greg returned to the table he reached once again for his ink pen and the

thick tri-fold paper that doubled as a napkin. On it he wrote...**Assessing the Presentation.** “The first possible implication of the economy of experiential environments on preaching environments is assessing the presentation of the communicational truth of the sermon. All I mean by this,” said Greg, “Is everything I’ve already been saying about learner-sensitive preaching since we’ve been meeting. We need to be sensitive to the variety of learning styles. We ought to consider technology as a tool for enhancing communication. And, all of this can and must be done without diminishing the sermon content. Essentially, assessing one’s use of creativity through the arts, interviews, tangible objects, and other multi-sensory methods to increase audience participation is what I mean by assessing the presentation.”

Next, Greg took his pen and wrote the words, **Assessing the Environment.** “I think the second implication of experiential environments as a cultural factor on preaching to an emerging generation is to take an environmental assessment. This means that the preacher, in cooperation with the church’s leadership team, should carefully consider the facility and the surroundings where the sermons are delivered. Is the environment in sync with the stated values of the organization? Does the subtle ambience set a mood that invites the attendee to hear the proposed proposition free from unnecessary distractions? Is the lighting hostile or inviting? What hospitality welcomes the adult learners and communicates to them that guests can feel at home and any question is safe? These are the kinds of inquiries that a healthy environmental assessment should include,” Greg said emphatically.

Bill started to interrupt, but Greg continued barely catching his breath, “However, it seems to me that the pastor and leadership team can merely facilitate this assessment.

If they could fix it or change it, they would have done so already. An outside consultant or, at the very least, a team of congregation members made up of those who are trained or have a natural bent for such matters should be recruited and authorized to suggest needed changes. Preschool and elementary check-in stations must also be evaluated along with safety and security issues. Lawn and exterior maintenance issues must be considered. Music as background noise is a common expectation of contemporary environments. In some cases, flavored coffee and comfortable seating areas are made available. In other cases, these applications to the desired environment would be far too casual for the experience the church leadership creates in its weekend services. I think I've pressed that point far enough, Bill. Can I go on to a third and final implication on preaching?" Bill nodded.

"To understand this implication we must understand that the motivation of a worthwhile experience is transformation. Pine and Gilmore call this the 'final economic offering.' Ultimately, an experience should connect the soul with change; help it become something more than it presently is. It is a search for meaning that only life with God yields."

"I don't see where we're going just yet. Help me out," interrupted Bill.

"Remember the movie, '*City Slickers* starring Billy Crystal?" Greg asked.

"Where they go on the cattle drive and run into the larger than life trail boss played by Jack Palance. Yes, I loved that movie. 'Best day, worst day, same day,'" said Bill as he tried to mimic the now famous lines from the movie.

"Why were the actors in the movie willing to go to the dude ranch in the first place? What experience were they wanting and even willing to pay for in order to get?"

The answer I would suggest is transformation. That ‘one thing’ that Curly was talking about. And, transformation is what preaching ‘sells,’ right? The dude ranch was selling the potential for soul transformation. Church communicators ‘sell’ soul transformation, don’t they?” asked Greg. “With this in mind, preaching assists people in **Assessing Life Change.**”

Greg paused long enough to write the words down before he continued. An assessment of life change encourages people to assess the quality of life they are experiencing given the subject being addressed that day. This may be either verbal or written. Let’s say that people admit that they want to become more relationally connected. The preacher defines, explains and ‘draws a picture’ of what relationally connected people say, do and experience. He helps the adult learner assess personally how she or he is doing in this area of life. Then the preacher persuades the hearers to think, behave and participate in an experience that has the opportunity to transform them. In other words, he invites them to join a small group made up of spiritually interested individuals, led by a spiritual director facilitating spiritual conversations. After six months, the preacher and the discipleship leaders do another check to assess whether or not the participants are more relationally connected than before.”

“Short-term mission trips are another example,” said Greg. “Parents and their kids can pay a fee to go on a serving trip to the Dominican Republic to do medical missions, build churches, or conduct neighborhood Bible clubs. Their children experience another culture, but more than that, parents have paid for potential transformation. They have increased the chance that in the backdrop of poverty their children will become less selfish, more grateful and more generous. In this example,

experience preaching will help parents see the need for experiencing the trip, and for taking their children with them. The sermon becomes a tool to persuade them concerning a personal assessment on needed life change hoping it will lead to them taking a next step leading to transformation.”

“I see now that all three of these create a unified message,” said Bill thoughtfully. “The environment outside of the auditorium is reflecting values and themes. The sermon itself, and the creative arts/methods that communicate it, are clear and relevant in all the ways that respect the Scripture and the audience to whom the proposition is being proposed. And, finally, the preacher is helping the hearers assess the next steps of their spiritual journey by introducing them to another environment beyond the weekend services that has been designed for transformation. Can a pastor really become that intentional about doing *experience preaching*, Greg?”

“I hope so,” Greg replied. “The discipleship of a generation of ‘blue man’ fans may well depend on it!”