

*Preaching the Bible in a New Sitz im Leben: The Bible in the Context of the Popular Media*

Back in the day when I was taught biblical exegesis in service of preaching, one of the main emphases was the question of the text's original "*Sitz im Leben*," the life-situation which gave rise to the text. If we could understand the first "setting" of the text, we could understand and apply it. But there is more to understanding and applying the biblical text than its "original" setting. If the Bible bears God's Word for us today, the preacher needs to take seriously the new *Sitz im Leben* of the Bible in the popular culture.

While it used to be the case that the Bible was primarily the purview of "the church," of professionals and experts, this is less and less the case; at least in any exclusive sense. The world around us, outside of church walls and unhindered by any objections we might make, is interpreting and applying the Bible, and reflecting back to us what it expects from us. This is happening in movies and books, in music and in art; i.e., in various popular media.

If you will allow a personal example: A couple of months ago, I was driving in the car with my kids, and we were listening to "This Is Gospel," by Panic! at the Disco. My oldest sang along, "This is gospel for the fallen ones ... This is gospel for the vagabonds, Never-do-wells and insufferable bastards." She looked at me and said something like, "Why don't we sing like *that* in church?" What I heard her saying was that this was use of the word "gospel" that made sense; this matters, hits home, speaks to her where she is and as who she feels herself to be, in a way that—for her at least—"Here I raise my Ebenezer" hasn't yet.

So, why can't we sing like that? Is it too real, too honest? Is it that it is vulgar, too "secular"? Whatever answers we might offer, no matter how true, it is time to stop avoiding the culture, to stop being only "other" or "apart" or "above," and get in there.

Media appropriation of the Bible is all around us. 2014 saw the release of two movies

which offered fresh retellings of biblical stories: *Noah* (Paramount Pictures) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (Twentieth Century Fox). The USA Network is currently running the show *Dig*, which has at its core a text from the book of Numbers, and the National Geographic Channel has produced a series called *Killing Jesus* (original airdate 3/29/2015). These stories take the biblical narrative to new places of interpretation, speaking in biblical language to present-day issues in powerful—and strange, and unfettered—ways. What various popular media have to offer is a new context for the practice of biblical interpretation, and we preachers need to listen, to watch, to welcome it in.

The conversation is out there. It is happening. And if we can engage this new “life-setting” of the text, not only will our understanding of the biblical text grow, but the impact of our preaching will as well.

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