

Open-Minded Preaching: Sharing a Word with the 'Spiritual, but not Religious'

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One day, after several decades of ministry, I will look back at passages from my old sermons and blog entries and wonder, "What was I thinking?" I anticipate this future moment with expectant curiosity rather than fear. Wise pastoral ministry, after all, involves a constant reevaluation of one's cultural context. It is healthy to anticipate gradual change over a career.

As a cradle Presbyterian this approach to change makes sense. After all, I have heard that Latin phrase quoted dozens of times: *ecclesia reformata semper reformandum*, "the church reformed, and always being reformed." But even though I have embraced a vision of reform, and though I was aware that my ministry would reform as well, I did not expect to be reevaluating significant areas of ministry while in my late twenties.

Ministry with those who refer to themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" has changed my understanding of the Church, my analysis of culture, and my approach to preaching.

My Evolving Understanding of the "Spiritual, but not Religious" Begins

I grew up participating in a strong youth ministry program in which faith was nurtured, not spoon-fed. Along with the vast majority of those in my confirmation class, I took seriously the task of writing a personal statement of faith and presenting it to the church elders. Later, I attended a church-related college and majored in religion. Positive experiences in the church, and a sense of call to congregational leadership, led me to seminary. Along the way I picked up a suspicion of those who called themselves "spiritual, but not religious" (SBNR). I was formed by communities that identified themselves (sometimes verbalized, but many times not) over and against these SBNR types.

My communities would say, "We go to church, give to the stewardship campaign, and have a *real* community as opposed to those 'spiritual but not religious' fellows." Or perhaps, "Who do they think they are, inventing their own religion as if they were the center of the universe?"

Jeremiads against "Sheilaism," the personal religion constructed by a woman named Sheila, were commonplace.¹ Some of these critiques were more even-handed than others, but they all carried with them a chastising tone. At conference presentations, from pulpits, and in seminary classrooms—places where kindness and respect were supposed to be modeled—I encountered bitter righteous indignation towards the SBNR. This unease affected me, and I too became suspicious of the "poor, wandering, deluded" SBNR.

But something happened on the way to the pulpit. Over a fairly short time, my perspective on the SBNR evolved from a critical skepticism to a sympathetic understanding, even respect, for their searching. It is difficult to pinpoint this change in my perspective, for it occurred while I was reading plenty of emergent church leaders,

experimenting with the latest social media technologies, and serving as pastor in a small rural congregation. What is clear, however, is that relationships with non-church-attending peers supported my new, less judgmental viewpoint.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence, then, that Carol Howard Merritt begins a section, “Spiritual, Not Religious” in her book *Tribal Church* with a story of a personal relationship as well. Merritt, a Presbyterian pastor, writes of a time when she met a young couple to discuss their upcoming marriage at the church. The couple had met online, and the bride had grown up Presbyterian. The groom, however, had a confession to make. He was spiritual, not religious. Instead of criticizing, Merritt listened. Merritt writes that she understands many young adults have

a vague view of religion that we discern from the public forum: evangelists on the television defending prayer in school, wanting the ten commandments on the walls of our courthouses, and promoting intelligent design: picketers in front of abortion clinics yelling out “murder” to a scared teenage girl, and fanatics outside the funerals of homosexual college students holding signs that read “God Hates Gays.”²

Indeed, I fear this perception of Protestantism is an easy stereotype for many SBNR folks to gather about the faith—it’s anti-intellectual, judgmental, and certainly not open to those with uncertain beliefs.

While I find this view seriously lacking, I also hesitate to rally for an unflinching assessment of what many of our congregations do look like from the outside looking in. I owe much of my faith journey to the mainline church, but like any institution, it too has its flaws—many perhaps more easily diagnosed from a distance. Merritt calls for a halt to judging the SBNR as they form opinions of the church. She writes, “When a young person explains that she is more spiritual than religious, she wants to take a step back from the intolerance and hypocrisy of modern institutions and emphasize orthopraxis over orthodoxy; in other words, younger generations are much more interested in right practice than right belief.”³

I now lead a Lutheran outreach to emerging adults in their twenties and thirties. We particularly seek to connect with those who feel unwelcome in many established congregations. As I meet with twenty-to-thirty-somethings and hear their stories of faith and experience with the church, almost to a person they self-identify as “spiritual, but not religious.” Hearing their stories has broadened my understanding of the SBNR identity and continued my evolution away from the snide characterizations of my past. Briefly, here are some of the stories I have heard.

The Evolution Continues as the “Spiritual, but not Religious” Share their Stories

The name of one SBNR woman kept coming into conversations around town. Active volunteer with several non-profits, working fulltime for another social organization, and participating in prayer retreats at a local convent, this young person could teach me a lot. She did.

She told me that from a young age, she realized she was attracted to women. This understanding of her sexuality was so essential to her life that, initially, it did not strike her as possibly problematic for her church family. But it was. Gradually, her pastor and other congregational leaders made clear her homosexuality was not

acceptable in their congregation. Even so, she managed to participate actively at the church through high school by singing in youth choirs and being confirmed. Her faith was and is integral to her life, but her experience with church through high school left her deeply suspicious of organized religion.

Now she has found a place where she feels fully accepted: the gay and lesbian community. In her time between work and volunteering—the little that exists—she performs as a burlesque dancer at local pubs and clubs. When I asked about these performances, a twinkle came into her eye. Clearly they are a huge source of life and freedom for her. Intrigued, I wondered where her deep love for burlesque performance and singing came from. “Oh, there’s no question,” she said; “it all goes back to my Lutheran youth choir days!”

A man I met grew up in a conservative denomination, attended a Bible college of that denomination, and had hoped to become a youth pastor. But as his studies progressed, he found the claims of the Bible college faculty less and less convincing. He read more progressive scholars on his own and streamed YouTube videos of sermons and lectures. Eventually, his personal beliefs conflicted too much with what he was learning in school. He graduated, but did not pursue professional ministry. He continues to read widely, often discussing his faith with his wife, but they do not attend a church on any regular basis. They hope to move to a new town in a year or two and may look again for a congregation there. Now, however, he associates more with the SBNR crowd.

Or take a young woman I met in a coffee shop. She also grew up Lutheran, but after moving to a larger town has not been able to find a congregation in which she feels welcome. When she visits, she finds few young adults, and her fashion sense makes her stick out. She feels a sense of serenity about living where she does, certain that God has brought her to this place “for a reason.” But the reason, she senses, has more to do with finding a spouse than finding a congregation. She desperately seeks community, but can only find what feels like other people’s communities in established congregations. She still identifies as Lutheran, but told me, “I guess I’m less religious and more spiritual at the moment. I just can’t find a church where I fit in.”

I have summarized these persons’ stories because they are the real SBNR. Like Merritt understood the couple with whom she met, we should not assume they have selfish motives or feel superior towards the spiritual *and* religious. In fact, though I am a pastor, I share a vast many values with them. If I had not been formed by a loving congregation that welcomed my questions, struggles, and peculiarities, I easily could have found myself in my late twenties writing from the other side of the SBNR divide. Surely there are SBNR folks with particularly offensive notions of organized religion, those who approach anything connected to the church with disdain, but in my experience, these folks are much less common than those who use the phrase to put words to deeply felt and difficult search for God. Due to the nature of my ministry, those SBNR types I meet tend to be in their twenties, thirties, and forties. I suppose older folks who identify as SBNR could be a totally different breed, but even so, I would want to approach them with a posture of openness, humility, and respect, leaving the snide tone aside.

An Approach to Preaching with the “Spiritual, but not Religious”

For most pastors, addressing the question of preaching to SBNR folk is more a

hypothetical question than a weekly struggle for at least two reasons. First, those who identify as SBNR are unlikely to attend worship and hear much preaching. Often, they have become skeptical of loud Christian claims presented as fact without the benefit of two-way conversation. The very nature of traditional preaching is somewhat off-putting, so it is unlikely they would seek it out.

Second, a congregation consisting entirely of the SBNR would be a very unique congregation indeed. So constructing sermons particularly appropriate for the SBNR must be done in a similar way to sermons for parents or the elderly or any specific demographic found in a congregation. That said, the approaches do cross over, and it is not as if a sermon preached with the SBNR in mind would be inappropriate for those more commonly found in the church.

As a preacher fashions sermons considering the SBNR, first she must tackle the question of authority. For most SBNR folk (and postmoderns in general), the notion of authority has moved away from the idea of one all-wise leader serving as the lone expert, doling out truth to a more communal notion.

In *The Hospitality of God*, Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham present a study of 14 emerging churches relating to the Anglican tradition. One similarity they note in worship practices—from California to England—is a new notion of authority. Put succinctly, they sum up: “Authority is a conversation.”⁴ The congregations about which Gray-Reeves and Perham report employ a range of preaching methods including “sermons preached by laity, sermons responded to in conversation during a feedback time, or individuals creating their own reflections by participating in Open Space.”⁵ The authors suggest, and my experience corroborates, that many SBNR folks have no expectation that a church institution—whether it be a denomination, congregation, or representative thereof—expect to wield authority over the beliefs of individuals. This is not to say that for SBNR persons all authority evaporates; rather authority is gained through relationships, conversation, and collaborative discovery.

With this understanding of authority in mind, preachers should approach preaching as a collaborative task. Exegesis might be done with members of the congregation, and at the least with other pastors. Preachers should not shy away from making strong claims (or personal confessions of faith), but they should do so while also acknowledging different viewpoints and welcoming further conversation.

Lucy Rose addresses this new conversational authority in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*. Rose writes, “A sermon’s content is a proposal offered to the community of faith for their additions, corrections, or counterproposals.”⁶ This humble, communal approach to preaching would be welcomed by the SBNR. For Rose, a preacher’s task is to search for meanings. She writes,

This meaning is then submitted to the community of faith through the sermon for their answering meanings. One meaning finds multiple meanings, one experience of grace funds multiple experiences of grace, one proposed articulation of the gospel funds multiple articulations of the gospel, through the Spirit that prods and prompts the hearts and minds of the congregation.⁷

Authority ultimately is communal, conversational, a shared process.

Another area preachers must consider has to do with the acceptance of questions.

My experience working with SBNR persons of Generation X and Y shows that they often seek a faith community open to their questions, and they find it difficult to be members of faith communities that lack opportunities for open questioning. Such questions may be of many types, including, “What does the Bible say about such-and-such?” “Why does the church not welcome gays and lesbians?” “What should I believe about my co-workers from vastly different faith traditions?” Persons come to a faith community seeking more a place to ask these questions than a place to receive pat answers. If authority is conversation, the answers may come through time in the community, but there is no hurry.

Preachers, then, can style their sermons as open to questions. In fact, they might even preach sermons on questions that specifically leave the answers open and emphasize the faithful process of question-asking. Once I heard a preacher use an extreme version of this approach, preaching a sermon with three different takes on the scripture passage. The preacher described each of three approaches to the passage as helpful, but also lacking in some sense. The conclusion of the sermon, to the dismay of many hearers, did not claim one interpretation as better than the others. No one way was deemed “right.” Instead, the preacher held up her hands and said, “I’m not sure which of these approaches is best. What do you think?” While the lack of even a proposal, as Lucy Rose calls for, might be off-putting to many hearers, I expect plenty of SBNR questioners would appreciate the preacher’s honesty and openness to claiming that some questions are best to be continually wrestled with.

Another approach preachers may employ calls for a careful consideration of traditional theological doctrines. While most preachers may be fairly settled in their beliefs (presumably after being taught in seminary not to stray into heresy), the act of preachers claiming the tension—even “playing with” heretical ideas—may help the SBNR in their search for faith. Let me be clear: I am *not* claiming that preachers should become heretical to attract the SBNR. Rather, I suggest that many SBNR persons are asking the same types of questions that the church has struggled with for centuries. So, for example, a preacher might consider in a sermon the idea that the New Testament’s message replaced and made irrelevant the Old Testament, and then go on to explain why that approach fails to fully satisfy or make sense.

The questions SBNR folks may be asking are not necessarily new. Preachers who model how to consider such questions (even those deemed heretical) with an openness and lack of fear, show all—SBNR and familiar members alike—that the community of faith has considered such questions for centuries and welcomes other sojourners concerned with important points of doctrine.

An additional benefit of claiming the tension of important theological concerns is that many SBNR simply do not know what the church teaches. Through the media and even in personal interactions with certain believers, the SBNR may encounter very few Christians who are open, say, to considering the differences between the gospel writers or examining if there’s a scriptural basis for God changing God’s mind. The post-modern world in which most SBNR relate tends to steer clear of stark black and white distinctions, instead examining and living in the tension of difficult questions and re-considerable conclusions. Preachers who show a willingness to claim this tension and consider settled doctrine will connect positively to the SBNR. The point is not to preach heresy, but that in considering the thought process behind some heretical claims, preachers will connect to those currently concerned with such questions.⁸

Finally, a word on apologetics. While some preachers may feel it necessary to approach the SBNR with brilliantly reasoned arguments for God's existence and the import of responding to that reality within a specific faith tradition, this instinct should be resisted. Successful persuasion with the SBNR comes through relationship and conversation. Brian McLaren explains, "The dominant thing we have to prove to spiritually-seeking non-Christians in a postmodern world is not that Christianity is true. We have to prove that it is good and beautiful. And if they are convinced it is good and beautiful, they will be open to it being true."⁹

Perhaps it was always this way, but it certainly is the case today: actions convince better than words. Showing and listening is often more effective than telling. If Christians—preachers included—live out their faith with a joyful, humble, Spirit-seeking approach, then the SBNR will take note. That is not to say we should cease sharing the good news, but that we do so because it is the joyful confession of our lives rather than because it convinces every SBNR to fall in line.

Ultimately, there is no quick fix to effective preaching for the SBNR. Adding PowerPoint slides and movie clips to traditional sermons will not entice SBNR persons any more than bolding "welcome" on a church's old sign out front. Instead, preaching to SBNR folks requires a new posture, one best formed out of relationships with self-identifying "spiritual, not religious" friends, neighbors, even provocateurs. These relationships built on love, patience, and a search for mutual understanding should lay the groundwork for preachers seeking to reach out to the SBNR. Then, after sharing a word (or many) with the SBNR, a preacher can, in humility and faith, share *the* word with all God's children.

Notes

1. Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 235.
2. Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007), 72.
3. Ibid.
4. Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham, *The Hospitality of God: Emerging Worship for a Missional Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 26-33.
5. Ibid., 29.
6. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 5.
7. Ibid.
8. While preachers might consider a sermon series on "The Appealing Heresies of the Faith," it would be better to take a different approach, finding a sermon series title more inviting of conversation. Perhaps a welcoming sermon series would be entitled: "Age-Old Questions Pondered Anew."
9. Michael Duduit, "Preaching to Post Moderns: An Interview with Brian McLaren," <http://preaching.com/resources/articles/11565751/> (accessed October 1, 2011).