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Footnotes: Curated Resources for Ministers

Harding School of Theology

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Footnotes: Ministers & Movies

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Footnotes¹

¹Curated Resources for Ministers



Hey friends,
Jesus spoke in parables using the stuff of his day: farming, livestock, marriage, and other social norms that would connect his audience with themes like forgiveness, justice, and the kingdom of God. Today, preachers use movies to illustrate these themes. Often, it works. These stories seem to provide a shared experience we don't always get in sports (too regional) and politics (too partisan).

But movies present some problems for preachers. Are preachers relying too much on content created by others who aren't putting the gospel at the center of the message? Do hearers connect with film references? Do people even watch the same movies? Has Netflix killed the shared experience of watching something that friends have also seen? Is the whole enterprise so immoral that it is beyond redemption? Where using movie reference once felt like being Paul on Mars Hill, does it now feel like being a spectator at the Colosseum? I'd like to have some better answers for these questions, so I'll talk with some friends who know movies and watch them with a critical eye. In this issue:

- Footnotes Roundtable with Daniel Crouch,
- Footnotes Audio with movie guru Cameron Holland,
- Echelon's Middle America Project,
- Preaching Colossians,
- And a Few More Footnotes.

Thanks for subscribing to Footnotes.



Footnotes Roundtable: Daniel Crouch

Daniel Crouch lives in Little Rock, Arkansas and is a student at Harding School of Theology. You can find him at [Religion & Story](#).

BT: What role do movies occupy in your faith?

DC: The role of movies in my own faith is almost entirely determined by their role in the current culture. At this time, movies represent the most nuanced, multifaceted, and popular art form in the world—rivaled only by the novel. No other medium is able to entertain and influence so many people so easily. For this reason, I watch as both clergy and laity: I watch to understand the world, and I watch as part of the world.

BT: How do you wish Christians would watch movies differently?

DC: While Christians certainly ought to guard their holiness in all they do, I think that bit of wisdom often overshadows a more valuable habit for watching movies: reflection.

BT: What themes/ideas/habits do you think we should get in touch with?

DC: I've written before on the simple task of reflecting on every movie we watch. There might be some truth in the idea that film is for escapism, that we ought be able to shut our brains off when we turn on a fun action blockbuster, but the reality is that every movie—even the most mindless—deserve a moment of reflection. A Terrence Malick film might necessitate a full two hours of attention, but even a Marvel installment deserves a moment of thought—if not for the hard work by all those involved—to at least register how you have been affected over the hour and a half runtime. Simply put: spend no less than 30 seconds of reflection on each and every movie you watch.

BT: How should preachers use movie references?

DC: More liberally. And along with all sorts of other outside aids. Movies are, again, the most popular and powerful medium currently available. We should take advantage of that to communicate with our congregations. As a rule of thumb, more popular movies are probably better to this end, but not necessarily.

BT: In what ways are preachers using movies incorrectly?

DC: In obvious or loosely connected ways. Those are really just the rules of being judicious, but obviousness and disconnectedness are so detrimental to the task of preaching that they bare stating plainly. Don't use a scene from *Inside Out* to illustrate emotions—that's too on-the-nose. And don't use a scene from *Remember the Titans* when giving a sermon on Joshua 1:9 just because you like the movie. Pick movies that really, truly are dealing with the point you're making but aren't the movies that your congregation knew were going to be referenced just from reading the sermon's title in the bulletin.

BT: What are the top five movies ever?

DC: I'd rather explain the Trinity than pick just five, but here's a few with a little variety: *Raging Bull* (1980); *The Godfather* (1972); *Back to the Future* (1985); *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); *Fargo* (1996).

BT: What are some films that every minister should watch?

DC: *Dekalog* (1989) reimagines what it means to live out God's revelation on Sinai, making it frighteningly closer to our hearts. *Lady Bird* (2017) is by women about women, so it can do nothing but widen our vision for leadership in churches. *Do The Right Thing* (1989) stands as the best film on race, and is easily worth the watch. Besides being another gem from Pixar, *Ratatouille* (2007) is the finest example of taking something we thought could only be known in a certain way (taste) and conveying it through another (visuals). It might feel odd, but *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) captures what preachers in America are facing. *Inherit the Wind* (1960) is a sympathetic portrait of both sides of the ideological aisle.

BT: What movie clip have you found most impactful when used in worship?

DC: The final sacrifice scene from the [Iron Giant](#) (or the prayer scene from [Shenandoah](#))

BT: Is Netflix killing the communal movie-watching experience?

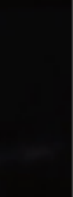
DC: Less so for movies than television, but yes.

BT: Do you watch the credits?

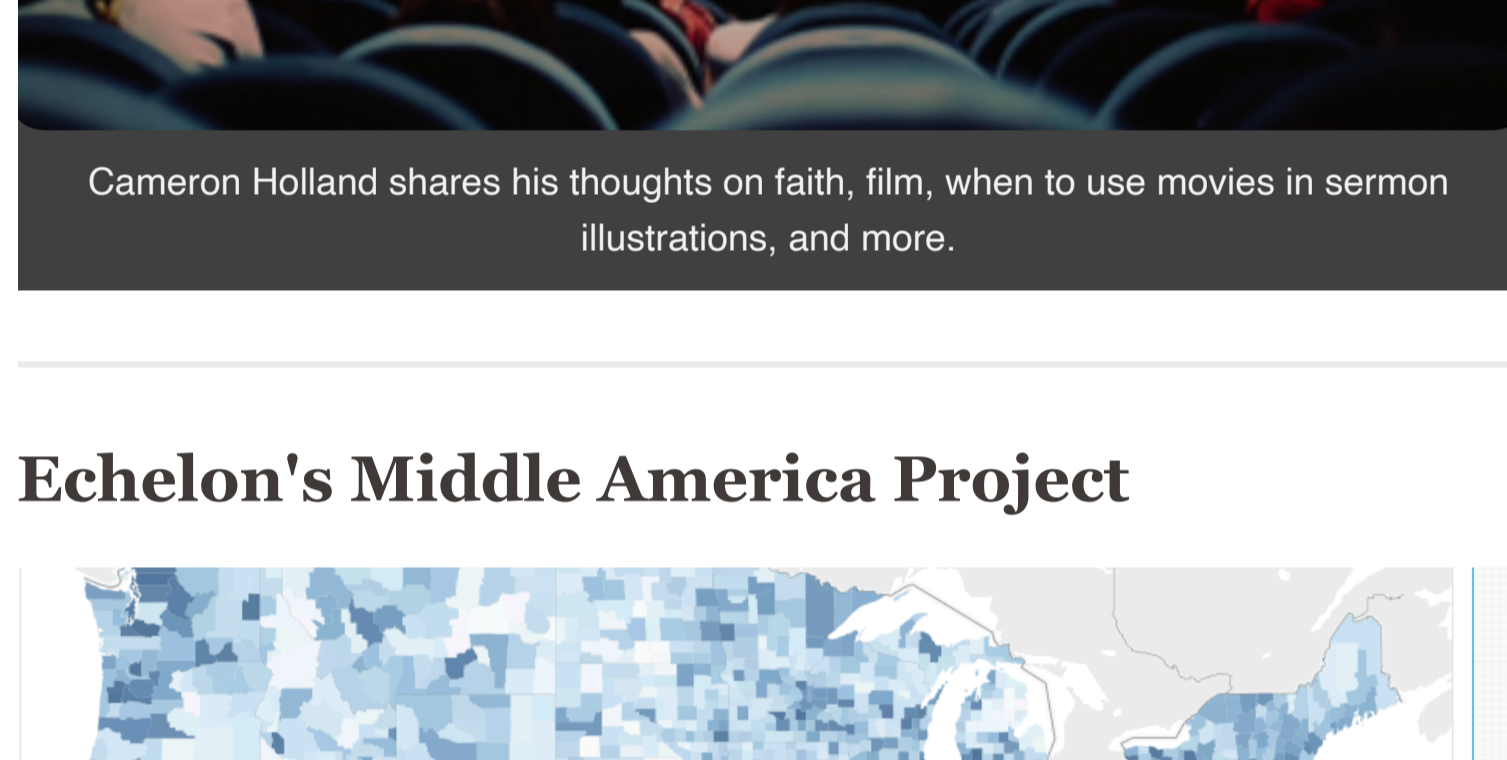
DC: Depends on how much I liked it or if it's a Marvel movie.

BT: Can you think of an example of the movie being better than the book?

DC: So many. *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban* was better on the screen. So was *Jurassic Park*.

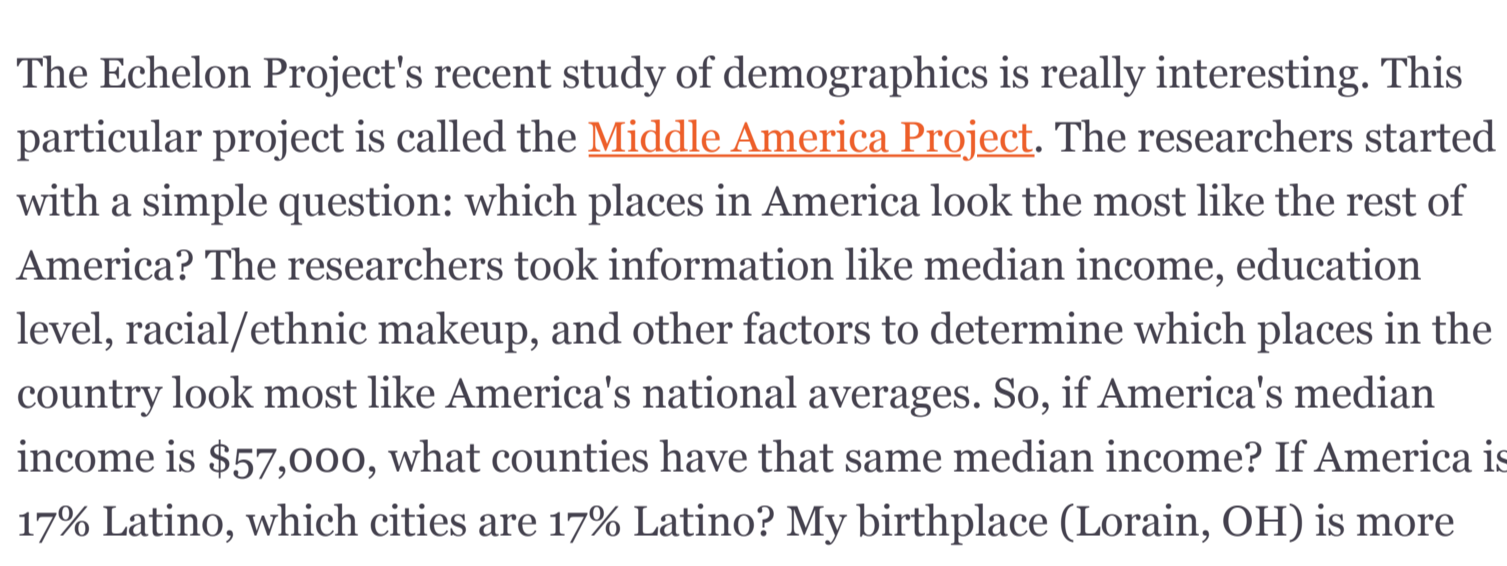


Footnotes Audio: Cameron Holland



Cameron Holland shares his thoughts on faith, film, when to use movies in sermon illustrations, and more.

Echelon's Middle America Project



The Echelon Project's recent study of demographics is really interesting. This particular project is called the [Middle America Project](#). The researchers started with a simple question: which places in America look the most like the rest of America? The researchers took information like median income, education level, racial/ethnic makeup, and other factors to determine which places in the country look most like America's national averages. So, if America's median income is \$57,000, what counties have that same median income? If America is 17% Latino, which cities are 17% Latino? My birthplace (Lorain, OH) is more typical than 85% of America, while my home (Shelby, TN) is more typical than 60% of America. Here are a few more of my takeaways:

- New York County (Manhattan) is only more typical than 2.5% of the country. Washington D.C. is even less similar than the rest of America.
- That doesn't mean it is a big metro thing. Cook County (Chicago) comes in at 40%, while Los Angeles County hits 46%.
- Like most quantitative studies, this study is helpful for getting us past a lot of the anecdotal material that often enslaves us to a particular point of view, where we lock into 2-3 episodes that have happened in our lives and take them to be typical for the place we live.
- We often like to assume our contexts are really unusual and hard for others to fully appreciate or understand. This might not be the case, however. Sometimes our experiences are quite average.
- The emphasis on Middle America is also helpful to bring clarity to some misperceptions about non-coastal areas. One of these is that Middle America lacks the diversity of coastal areas. In so many cases, that is flatly wrong, particularly in places like Houston (22% of residents born outside of the U.S.) or places like Detroit or Memphis where African-Americans outnumber whites. Even places like Youngstown, Ohio (frequently associated with the white, working-class) has equal percentages of African-Americans and whites. In fact, despite having a small fraction of the total population, declining Youngstown has nearly as many African-Americans as burgeoning Portland, Oregon.
- But racial balance is not the only item under consideration, but also things like income and educational levels. How often are people able to mingle with those of higher and those of lower income levels?
- I find this to be a fascinating study to ask the question of how well we understand others. We could argue that residents of Middle America places (like Omaha) have the best handle on the country, since they actually live in the place most like the rest of the country.
- Then again, we might suggest that a resident of Washington D.C. interacts with a particular set of data that would be so unfamiliar to the rest of us that they would actually have a more interesting perspective (such as one of those kindergarten classes with 12 kids from 12 countries).
- I'm not sure on this one. I'm trying to imagine a high school principal from Omaha getting on the NYC Subway for the first time and ending up on the other side of Queens before noticing his mistake.
- Likewise, I imagine a born-and-raised Brooklynite losing her mind during her first Monday morning of rush-hour traffic in Atlanta.
- I'm not sure. Maybe this all is just a really good encouragement to value where others are from, what others have seen, and the limitations of our own experiences.



Preaching Colossians

During the past few weeks, Rodney Plunket and I have been preaching through the book of Colossians in a series: From Colossae to Memphis. Here are some of the books I've found most useful:

Jerry Sumney, [Colossians](#), New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). The best, most-accessible work for getting in the text. Like many in this series, it manages to cover things you might care about without getting lost in the esoteric weeds. Readers with a background in Churches of Christ will notice that he thanks his teachers, Harvey Floyd and Richard Oster, for his interest in Paul's letters.

Marianne Meyer Thompson, [Colossians and Philemon](#), Two Horizons (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). She's more well-known for her work on John's Gospel, but this is worth your time. The series is ideal for preaching because it bridges biblical studies and theology in a way that keeps us attentive to the details of the text (biblical studies) and the implications for the larger way we think about God, the church, and the work of God in the world (theology).

Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, [Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire](#) (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004). This is easily the most interesting of the group. They imagine what it looks like for the church to embody the message of Colossians as a counter-cultural body the way early Christians would have done during the time of the Roman Empire.



A Few More Footnotes

1. When churches have sex predators [in the pews](#).
2. Arthur C. Brooks on "[Our Culture of Contempt](#)."
3. The decrease of [black home ownership](#).
4. This is fantastic. The *MIT Technology Review* ran [a story about how people who seek to differentiate themselves from the broader culture](#) tend to begin looking like one another. They chose to focus on hipsters. One angry hipster protested the story, suggesting that they never asked for his permission to use his photo for the piece. Only problem: [it wasn't actually a picture of him](#), but another hipster.
5. Oklahoma Christian University recently renamed their auditorium due to allegations that [N.B. Hardeman was a racist](#). For context, here is more on [past racial unrest](#) at OC. In a piece of irony, students took refuge during that protest in a hall named for George Benson, who avoided integration while president of Harding College. As for N.B. Hardeman, his namesake university recently made their own statement on their past, as President David Shannon boldly [issued this apology](#) at their recent Bible Lectureship.



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UPCOMING
April 1
Lent and the
Liturgical Calendar

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