

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



U2 vs. Star Wars:

LESSONS FOR OUR CHURCHES

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“You know I used to think the future was solid or fixed, something you inherited like an old building that you move into when the previous generation moves out or gets chased out. But it's not. The future is not fixed, it's fluid.”
- Bono, U2

This summer I had an unparalleled spiritual experience. **After waiting for over 25+ years I got to see U2 live.** Every time they came around I really wanted to go see them but I just couldn't swallow the cost. However, this time, my wife and kids got me tickets to go see U2 in concert when they swung by our local mega-stadium.

It was a stunning experience!

There was so much about it that was moving. As I've watched on Facebook and other social media channels, it would appear that a lot of my friends have had a similar experience this summer as the boys from Ireland are making their trek around the world. Even as the concert was happening, I was trying to figure out why this was such a great experience for me and I came up with the following few reasons:

- **It connected with my youth.** // These songs, in particular, have played as a part of the soundtrack of my life. My brother had the “Rattle & Hum” album when we

were young and I would listen to it over and over. This album was from the “concert movie” of the “Joshua Tree” tour from 30 years ago and this current tour literally helped me relive those memories. As the night rolled through it was like parts of my youth kept popping in my head.

- **I was cheering for Bono and the boys.** // At the beginning of the night, Bono said something like “thanks for letting us into your lives all these years”. I've heard him say this on a few talk shows about the tour, and this touched me deeply. In a weird way, Bono and The Edge have been a part of the extended friendship of my life. I was cheering for them as people not just rock stars ... for them to continue doing what they do ... and for all they've done. It was a celebration of them being them!
- **I saw a lot of people I knew... like a lot** // I kept joking that it is was a family reunion for the broader evangelical movement of a certain age. I saw so many people I knew that I haven't seen in years. I literally bumped into friends in a crowd of 50,000+ people. The density of “people like me” was higher than I've felt in a very long time and this was really comforting; we were all cheering for us and our experiences.

I loved the concert! I know it sounds crazy in a cynical world to say it was a dream come true. **I'll probably hold onto the memories of that night for years and years to come.** I'm thankful for the experience and honored that I got to be there. **However, it was unsettling.**

I've said that if I could get U2 to lead worship at my church I would literally die and go to heaven. That would feel like the ultimate expression of worship to Jesus from my cultural frame. **In fact, at one point in the concert, Bono proclaimed "We want to take you to church!"** It was indeed a worshipful experience.

It was unsettling because I think what I was witnessing was a farewell tour of "my band". I think what the boys were trying to do is ride out on top and thank their fans without letting out their emotions of this being a "farewell tour".

What does that have to do with church leadership?

There are a number of factors I noticed happening with U2 that I think have scary resemblances to what our churches will encounter if we do not keep a careful watch.



- **Nostalgia Sells.** // The first 10 shows cleared \$62 million for the band. Clearly, people are willing to invest financially in activities that help to recall the past. This is a dangerous trend for the church. We need to ensure we are leaning forward and inventing the future, and not living

off the fumes of the previous generation.

- **People of a Certain Age.** // My daughter was part of that generation that revolted that Apple "forced" U2's 2014 album Songs of Innocence onto her phone. There weren't any iPhone generation in the midst of that sea of Gen Xers. If U2 doesn't turn that around, they will be playing the casino circuit soon. Your church and mine face the same problem; if we aren't obsessed with reaching the next generation, we are a few short years away from total irrelevance and obscurity.

- **Cults of Personalities End.** // Bono feels like a prophet of some sort; I admire him and have been personally motivated by his stances on developing world debt and HIV/AIDS and poverty. There won't ever be another Bono after Bono, which is sad because he has used his platform to do so much good, but it is inherent in who he is; the way they've built the U2 brand and experience, it is obvious that it will come to end when they are done. So, many churches are leveraging incredibly gifted and prophetic voices. If we don't watch, however, those churches won't be able to continue to have their impact once their leaders are done. I'm not advocating for those strong voices to decrease... we need more and louder voices for the message of Jesus in our world, not less! I'm just acknowledging that there is a significant shadow side coming in many churches with great communicators at the core of their approaches.

What was happening in 1976?

U2 was formed in 1976 in Dublin, [\[ref\]](#) and Star Wars was filmed the same year. [\[ref\]](#)

I've often wondered what was happening in the broader culture that these two massive juggernauts were formed at the same time. They both came out of the milieu of what was happening in the day. They both are rooted in family stories; Star Wars really is just the story of

the Skywalker family, and even on this most recent tour, Bono was still talking about his dad. They both took a decidedly “outsiders” viewpoint on life. George Lucas always saw himself as an independent filmmaker trying to buck the “Hollywood system”, and U2 in a lot of ways have been the “anti-Rock Stars” using celebrity and fame to ask bigger questions.

Although both these forces of culture have had a huge influence in the past, Star Wars’ future is bright while U2’s future appears to be dimming before our eyes.

Consider how Star Wars is moving into its fourth decade of relevance and what that means for our churches:



• **Torch Being Passed.** // Star Wars is elegantly integrating the “past stars” from its universe, but decidedly moving to the next generation; it is the same universe and messaging but next generation. The “past generation” is lending its credibility to pass along the brand to the people who will take it forward. I realize this isn’t really possible as a band, but it’s amazing to watch it happen with Star Wars. The “succession plan” that this organization is pulling off before our eyes is breathing new life and interest into this franchise. I loved how [William Vanderbloemen](#) quotes that [every pastorate is an interim one, in his book on church leadership succession](#). It’s never too early to have conversations about how we’re going to pass on what we do to the next generation. We need

to fill our teams and stages with young leaders today.

• **Kids as a Strategy.** // Star Wars is clearly worried about drawing kids. They have always wanted to have an edge to what they do that was whimsical and fun and that appealed to the younger audience. In its early days, U2 appealed to young people because of the themes and styles of their music. The Edge is a guitar god, but we live in a day [where the electric guitar is dying and almost absent from popular music](#). It’s nearly impossible for a church to “overinvest” in the next generation. Your kid’s ministry needs to be the most well-lead and best-funded part of what you do. It’s the leading edge to keeping your church, with eyes on where the culture is going. The kids’ and students’ ministry can’t be relegated to “sideshow status” in your ministry. It needs attention and care of the senior leadership to ensure it’s pushing forward.

• **Multichannel.** // Star Wars has made the leap to a multi-channel universe. The video games are as anticipated by the next generation as are the movie releases. They produced a series of shows just for release on Netflix. Star Wars has embraced the “net culture” and the widespread fan community. U2’s label, on the other hand, has sued bands playing homage to U2 for copyright infringement. [\[ref\]](#) Star Wars posted nine videos on YouTube in the last month whereas U2 posted nine videos on YouTube in the whole of last year. Our churches need to find new and creative ways to engage digital culture. Social media isn’t going away, in fact, it’s usage is spreading rapidly with each passing day, but there are still churches who are dragging their feet to leverage these channels to get their message out. Rather than asking people to just come to our services on Sundays, we should find ways to be of service to them during the rest of the week. We have the most important message in the world, let’s spread it!

I'm excited for the future of Star Wars. **I look forward to continuing sharing that universe with my kids and maybe grandkids someday.** My son and I are already talking about our plans for the next movie release and I'm pumped for the new Star Wars Battlefront game coming out this fall. We've talked about making the pilgrimage to the "Star Wars Land" at Disney World when it opens in 2019. It's fun that a piece of my childhood is having some sustained impact through to my kids.

My kids were happy for me and my wife to go see U2 in concert ... **there wasn't a whiff of jealousy or regret in the air.** On one level that bums me out because I love that music and I wish they did too but on another level, it's a fresh wake up call to keep focused on the next generation.

I hope I'm wrong about this being U2's farewell tour. I'd love to see them again sometime. **In the meantime, I'll keep humming along to their tunes from 30 years ago but keep thinking about where we'll be 30 years from now in our church.** I think Bono said it best on that Rattle & Hum album...

"Don't believe in the 60s, the golden age of pop. You glorify the past, when the future dries up - God Part 2"

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