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The Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest

Spring 1999

Austin 3:16 On Preaching in a Multi-Media Culture

by Pablo A. Jiménez

Last semester, as part of a lecture on the topic "Preaching in a Multi-Media Culture," I wrote the phrase "Austin 3:16" on the board. My students were intrigued. I asked how many of them had seen the phrase before. Only three of my 12 students said they had seen it. One of the three had seen kids wearing "Austin 3:16" shirts. Another knew the phrase was somehow related to professional wrestling. The third student – a male in his mid-thirties – was the only one who knew the meaning of "Austin 3:16."

Now, I know what you are thinking: "Is this an article about pro wrestling?" The answer is yes ... and no. Yes, I will address in this article issues raised by that piece of Americana called professional wrestling. But ultimately this is an article about the challenge of preaching the Gospel in a multi-media culture. Even if you are not thoroughly convinced, please read at least the following paragraph before quitting on me.

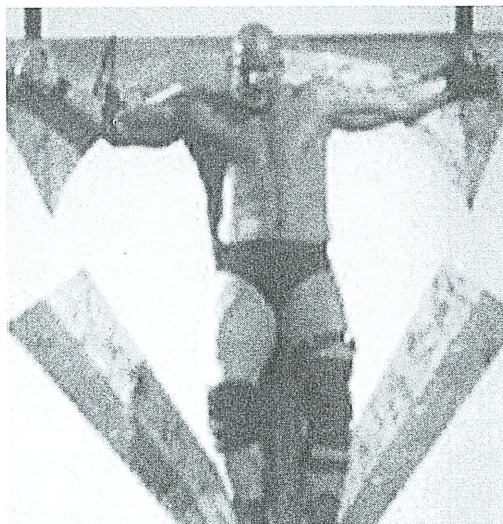
Professional wrestling is experiencing a revival in the United States. Pollsters estimate that 35 million viewers – about a

third of the U.S. population – tune in the weekly programs produced by the *World Wrestling Federation* (WWF) and the *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW). Their competing Monday night programs draw a combined audience of 11 million viewers. Most of the viewers are young males, teens, and children. According to a recent *TV Guide* article, wrestling has higher ratings than *The Simpsons* or *The X-Files* among

its target audience. The TV programs are little more than extended infomercials for the monthly pay-per-view extravaganzas produced by each company. They also market the merchandise associated with each company, which goes beyond the traditional toys, videos, caps and shirts to include a WWF cologne and a WCW credit card. They also produce video games for *Sega*, *Nintendo*, and *Game Boy*. Both companies have official magazines and Web sites

along with many other pages on the Web dedicated to individual wrestlers. Most of their shows are broadcasted live from arenas that follow a college circuit, including cities like Atlanta, San Antonio,

continued inside ...



*The televised crucifixion
of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin*

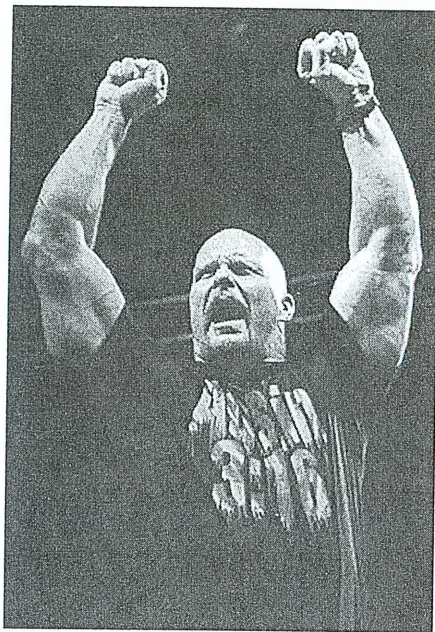
Multi-media . . . continued

Nashville, and Austin. The WWF has even launched an MTV program called *Celebrity Death Match*. Business is so good that the total revenue of the two major companies is estimated at over a billion dollars per year.

So far I have convinced you that pro wrestling is becoming a multi-media phenomenon. Now, what does this have to do with religion, in general, and with preaching, in specific? Well, meet Steve Austin, a Texan born in Victoria and living in San Antonio. After a series of odd jobs, Austin began wrestling for Ted Turner's WCW (yes, *that* Ted Turner) under the name "Stunning Steve." After he was fired from that company, he developed a character called "Stone Cold." In a recent interview he explained that the inspiration for this character was an HBO special on serial killers. He defines his TV persona as a Texan "redneck" who is angry at everybody and who trusts no one.

Before Austin's arrival, pro wrestling relied on a quasi-religious formula. There were heroes and villains (dubbed respectively "babyfaces" and "heels"). There could be "conversions" from hero to villain, but at the end the hero always prevailed. That was then. The change took place as the public began to cheer the villains. Austin hated everybody... and the public loved him. This led Vincent McMahon, the owner of the WWF, to abandon the traditional formula and to proclaim that now all characters are gray; there are no "good guys" anymore. WCW follows a similar philosophy, although it pales in comparison to McMahon's excesses.

McMahon exploits shamelessly any



Steve Austin in the ring ...

subject to make a buck. His productions and characters make constant reference to hate, racism and sex. He even boasts a group of wrestlers called *De-Generation X* whose presentation ritual makes a direct and crass reference to oral sex.

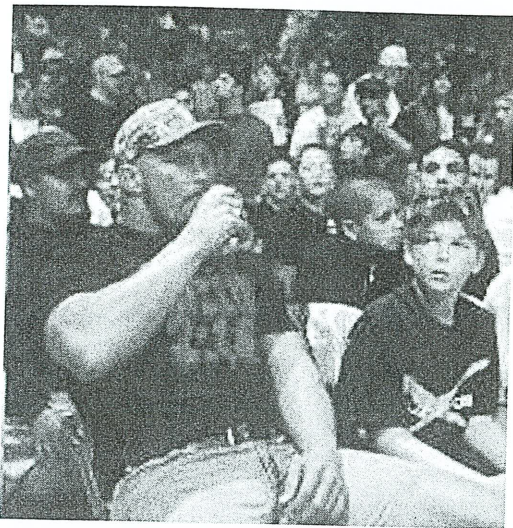
The WWF also exploits Christian symbols in its shows. Austin's signature phrase is "Austin 3:16," a direct reference to John 3:16. Yet, "Austin 3:16" is not a proclamation of good news. Supposedly, the

phrase reads "I just whooped your..." well, you get the picture. The misuse of the Gospel imagery does not stop here, though. Early in December 1998, Austin was "crucified" on *Raw*, the WWF Monday night program, by another wrestler named *The Undertaker* and his goons. Then, Austin took vengeance, burying alive *The Undertaker* in a pay-per-view show. Of course, *The Undertaker* "rose from the dead" to continue his "ministry of darkness."

Again, I know what you are thinking: "Do you have a point?" Yes, I do have one. There are 35 million

Americans for whom "3:16" is becoming a number related to violence, body slam, and kicking butt. Borrowing the old Lutheran dichotomy, we may say that for them "3:16" is law, not Gospel. In their minds the image of the crucified Jesus Christ is being blended with the image of "Stone Cold." The cross is being presented as an image for hate, bigotry, violence, racism and revenge. The resurrection is being presented as an opportunity for even more evil.

Furthermore, most preachers ignore that all this is being broadcasted by TV, downloaded from the Internet, and printed in magazines. Whenever they preach about



... and surrounded by his fans.

John 3:16, they do not counter the negative message of "Austin 3:16." The kids and young guys in their congregations think that their preacher is "out of touch" with them. Sadly, that is a correct assessment.

If we want to reach our kids, our teens and our youth, we need to have a working knowledge of the different cultural trends that dominate the media. We cannot keep on underestimating the impact of these trends in American culture as a whole. Otherwise, we will be as surprised as the pundits who never fathomed the election of Jesse "The Body" Ventura, a former WWF pro wrestler, as governor of Minnesota.

Please understand that by no means am I encouraging you to become a clicker trigger-happy couch potato. You do not have to log 40 weekly hours of TV in order to preach in a multi-media culture. However, you must be abreast of the trends in the different media, particularly if you expect to have anyone under 35 as part of your congregation. You may begin by reading the entertainment section of your local paper. There are specialized magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* (EW) and *TV Guide* that survey, comment and review different media productions, including the new TV seasons. Even *Newsweek* and *Time*

dedicate some space to these topics, providing a somewhat deeper analysis. There is also the Web, where you can find on-line versions of these publications. Among theological publications, the *Journal for Preachers* publishes columns that comment on trends in the arts and the media.

Once informed of these cultural trends, you can address the theological issues they raise. Take for example, the ones raised by the "message" of "Austin 3:16." You can explain to the teens and the youth of your local congregation that "3:16" is not a symbol of violence but a symbol of love. You can explain that it refers to John 3:16, a biblical text that affirms God's stubborn love for humanity. You can affirm that God's only child was sent to die for the salvation of humanity, even for the salvation of people like "Stone Cold."

Finally, I think I know your last question for me: "Why do you know all this stuff?" The answer is simple. I have an 11-year-old son who is a diehard fan of WCW's red and black NWO *Wolfpack* "4 life." Any more questions?



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"Stone Cold" photos from WWF web site www.wwf.com TitanSports credit: e-media LLC