

Transcript, Session 3

Platform

Finding and Building Your Audience

As we talk about how to find and build your audience, it's helpful to start with an understanding of what a platform is.

The dictionary says that a platform is "a raised floor or stage used by public speakers or performers so that they can be seen by their audience."

A platform is quite simply a way to help a person be SEEN and HEARD.

And how does our faith intersect with platform? Let's see what a Theology of Platform might look like.

In Nehemiah 8:4-5, we see a Biblical example of several key components to a good platform.

"Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion."

It goes on to say that a small group of 13 people stood on his left and right.

"Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them"

This passage highlights three crucial pieces in developing platform.

Visibility. Ezra stood on a high platform. The people could see him and he could be found amidst the crowd. For an effective platform, you have to be seen somehow, somewhere – through social media, writing, conference speaking or other ways. This will look different to different authors and genres of books.

Credibility. The passage highlights that Ezra was a known teacher of the Law. He had the knowledge, the authority, the wisdom to teach. For an effective platform, you need some degree of expertise in the topic, research, positional authority, or in other ways be someone that people will listen to.

Community. The wooden platform was built by others, and Ezra was accompanied by 5 people on his right and 7 people on his left. He wasn't alone. For an effective platform, you need friends, networks, organizations, communities, launch teams, etc. that magnify your voice and take your message further than you could go yourself.

Our platforms are a mix of visibility, credibility, and community. We need all three. As you think about your own platform, it might be helpful to consider where you are stronger and where you are weaker and focus your initial efforts in the weaker areas.

It's been said that a successful book project is a mixture of the right author with the right message to the right audience publishing with the right publisher at the right cultural moment. Building your platform to the right audience is a part of the process.

Building a platform is not necessarily unbiblical, prideful or attention-grabbing. Certainly our motivations play into this conversation. It can be helpful to view platform as a gift of love to readers – you have a gift for them and they need to be able to see and hear you.

This gift that you have to offer is to be stewarded well.

Your platform should fit your book. Don't waste your efforts telling disengaged or uninterested groups about a message that's intended for a different audience. Focus your efforts on people who need and want your message.

It's easiest, most effective, and natural if you're able to build a platform that connects with your work and passion. The more your heart is in it, the better. Take note of areas that are life-giving to you. How do you enjoy communicating? Social media? In person? Teaching? What's your favorite message to deliver? What do you get excited about talking about with others? Consider how you can build on those areas of passion and interest.

So, how do we build or grow a platform? First, let's look at relationships.

Just like Ezra, we are not meant to do this all alone. We need each other. Learn what others are doing and help them in their efforts – honestly, without expectation of reciprocation. Build relationships with like-minded people and learn from each other, support each other ...

... support their work and become champions for each other.

As you build relationships, it's important to be able to share a very short, compelling statement about your book. If you only have a quick elevator ride with someone, how would you describe your book in a way that will leave them interested and wanting to know more? What is your elevator speech that you can have ready at any moment?

Sharing your message with energy and passion through speaking engagements can be powerful. Consider offering yourself as a speaker at colleges, church groups, conferences, etc. Getting experience as a speaker helps you to refine your message, prepare yourself for interviews once your book is released, and build credibility.

As you speak and build relationships, it may be helpful to build an email list. It can be helpful to have a group of people connected and interested in your message. Create a plan to keep them informed about your message, your ministry, your book. Make sure that you are offering valuable content – not just self-promotion.

What about a blog or website?

It's extremely valuable to have some kind of online presence. This could be as small as a basic webpage with your professional headshot, bio, book information, and how to contact you. This could be as large as a multi-page site with resources, articles, videos, speaking engagements, information about you and your book, interactive elements, etc. There is a level of credibility that you gain when you have a website that reinforces your message. This is a key piece of visibility: being found and seen with a simple search online.

Writing articles or contributing to a blog – your own or another blog – is another helpful way to be found online. Write in a way that readers will become more familiar with your tone and voice. One caution: don't give away too much of your book content before the book releases. If you have 5 points in the book, consider giving one or two point in a blog and then let them know that all 5 points are in your book.

Another way to be found online is to create an Author Profile on Amazon and Goodreads. These are both free and helpful ways to reinforce credibility. Visit Author Central on Amazon and upload a picture, a bio, and link to your book. Similarly, you can join the Goodreads Author Program. On Goodreads, readers can follow you and you can connect with them in interesting ways. Visit Goodreads.com for more information. If you blog, you can link your blog posts on both sites.

Creating a podcast can be a more involved compliment to your book and message. A podcast is a bigger commitment that requires quite a bit of time, consistency, equipment, editing skills, and finances. This might be a natural outflow of your skills, message, and personality – if so, you might consider it. If this feels well beyond your skills and desire, consider partnering with others who create podcasts or offering yourself as a guest on other podcasts. Articulating your message in a podcast format can further build credibility and interest with readers.

Not surprisingly, social media can be an important way to connect with readers and peer. Conversations, encouragement, challenge, and community can happen when social media is used consistently.

When you think about your interactions on social media, use the 80/20 rule. This means 80% of your content should be general – personal comments, sharing friends' words, humor, news – things you would share with friends and acquaintances. This is content that is enjoyable, helpful, and consistent with your personality and message. Only 20% of your interactions should be self-promotional. Social media is very relational – relate to your followers and earn the right to be heard when you talk about your own projects. Too much self-promotion can become wearisome. This general rule can, of course, be somewhat broken during your book's launch week, when much of your content should naturally be about your book.

Consider posting one to three times each day on Facebook. If it helps, think about categories for your posts. What do you naturally enjoy? If movie quotes are your thing, perhaps it would be fun to share a movie quote of the day or week. Maybe it's quotes from a theologian, writer, activist, thought-leader, or other person who inspires or challenges you.

Be creative and have some fun. You could pose a question to your followers and cultivate engagement.

To engage well on Twitter, posts need to be much more frequent than Facebook. Engage thoughtfully, interact with others in respectful, interesting ways. Develop your voice in that space and be consistent.

Instagram can be a creative place to share your life with readers. While filters and editing tools are appropriate – and often expected – in the Instagram landscape, use some caution around making your life seem too perfect. Appropriate authenticity, messiness, and flawed beauty are powerful connecting elements on social media. As you share your life authentically in your own unique voice, your followers will share your words with others and you may gain more followers as a result.

When should a platform be built? I'm sure the literal, wooden platform that Ezra stood upon took a while to build.

This building does take time. In some ways, it's something that you've been building your entire life thus far – it's an outflow of your personality, connections, voice, message, and experience. Now is the time to make yourself more visible to others so they can see and hear you. Consider again the suggestion posed earlier: A platform is a mix of visibility, credibility, and community. We need all three. As you think about your own platform, consider where you are stronger and where you are weaker and focus your initial efforts in the weaker areas.

Look at your natural connections: people, institutions, organizations, media. Can you connect more closely with your connection? Is there a partnership possibility?

What is your preferred communication style? Speaking, blogging, podcasting, video, social media? Build on what you're already doing and grow your audience there.

It often makes the most sense to build on what you've already established. If you've had a significant career or ministry change, this might require some creative thinking around how you can link the previous platform to your new one.

How about areas to avoid in building a platform?

For some authors, it's tempting to share too much content, too soon before the book releases, too often, and too loudly. This can burn out your readers well before the book is available. It might be difficult, but it can be helpful to temper your enthusiasm a bit and remember the 80/20 rule.

On the other side of the spectrum is disengagement. Having social media and a blog, but not posting content for months at a time actually makes it seem that you don't have things to say and can work against you in building a platform. So, only engage on the platforms that you can realistically manage and be consistently engaged.

Another pitfall is falling into the trap of scarcity-thinking – believing that if you help someone else, it'll hurt your project. While you want to be wise in who and how you help, it's important to be as generous as possible. We're on the same team, often with the same goals as our close peers. How can we work together? Let's lift all of our voices together. That will lead to a much stronger platform for yourself and others.

While it's fine to address an audience that isn't your primary target audience, protect your prime energy for your target audience. This might mean occasionally declining one speaking engagement for a non-target group in favor of writing a blog or article that is for your target audience.

In the same vein, it might be tempting to spread yourself too thin and accept every invitation and churn out articles and blogs en masse. There's no hard and fast rule on this, but self-awareness will help you identify when you're doing too much. Don't be afraid to scale back just a bit and focus on quality engagements.

Let's revisit an important aspect of building a platform. There's no doubt that Ezra's natural gifting informed his status and position as a teacher, along with his work and study. What is your natural gifting and areas of work?

Let's look at the core elements of a platform again, starting with visibility. Where are you currently seen? Where do you currently have influence?

Where would it be helpful to gain more visibility? Can you link your current visibility to where you'd like to be seen?

Again, don't be afraid to focus your best energy on areas where your primary audience is located.

Next, credibility.

Do you have an elevator speech about why others should listen to you? Not in a prideful way – but, what makes you someone with something to say about this particular topic?

How can you show your credibility? Consider social media, speaking engagements, articles.

Find the areas – publications, people, ministries, organizations, podcasts, groups – that fit your books message.

And now, community.

Who has encouraged you in your message and work? Who has supported your work? Colleagues, friends, advisors, peers, etc.

Who could become supportive? Who would get excited about your message? If you don't know them yet, do you know someone who could make an introduction? Beware of the pitfall of simply using a connection. Approach others in honesty and humility, in an effort to partner together, not use another person.

Build relationships in areas that fit your book. Learn from each other and support the good work of others.

Lastly, some final words...

Vinita Hampton Wright wrote about creativity in her book *The Soul Tells a Story*.

"In the cosmic economy there is room for every gift. There is reason for every creative work. And every creative work enhances, and is enhanced by, the work of others. You are not alone. You are not overly important, and you are not insignificant."

This perspective can energize and embolden your efforts as you building a platform.