

The Quest for Relevance

"The timeless is finally that which is most relevant, and we are not to forget this fact in our pursuit of relevance." – John Seel

The church of our age seems to be very preoccupied with the pursuit of “cultural relevance”. Candidly, every time I hear the term I cringe just a tiny bit because I never know exactly where the discussion is heading.

There is little doubt that various responses to the clamor for greater relevance have fueled numerous changes in how church is done; seeker services, topical preaching to felt-needs, the use of technology, the advance of Christian music and print media into the secular marketplace. But, one fact remains; how the total number of believers is distributed amongst mini-churches, mid-churches, mega-churches, contemporary churches, traditional churches and blended churches tells us very little. A generation or two must pass before we will be able to determine whether or not the culture-at-large has become more or less “Christianized”.

From a Roman prison, the apostle Paul anticipated his eventual execution. He was deeply concerned about how the work of the kingdom would fare with those who would carry on in his absence. This concern was evident in his second letter to Timothy, a young man whom he loved as a son. Paul does not touch on how Timothy should fashion his preaching and teaching ministry so as to make it or keep it relevant. He seemed much more concerned with Timothy’s enduring faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel:

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. –
2 Timothy 1:13

What immediately preceded that challenge was Paul’s description of the Gospel by which he had won and discipled Timothy for Jesus Christ. Timothy’s role was to lovingly and faithfully teach it with clarity. That gospel didn’t need to be tweaked. Its hard theological content did not need to be hidden in favor of only presenting its most practical (or relevant) aspects. Paul knew that his gospel was relevant in and of itself, not primarily because it made marriages more loving, family life more pleasant or life’s headaches more palatable (all very good fruits of the gospel), but because it touched upon the presence and the promises of God with him who believes - through this life and into eternity.

Paul warned Timothy of a time to come “when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3). Not everything that some prefer to hear over “sound doctrine” is bad or sinister. It may be positive and useful. It is just simply not on the same level of significance as “sound doctrine.” The danger is that if the church downplays the message of the cross and emphasizes things that are more ear-pleasing, the ability of believers to discern truth and error will become atrophied, which will render them susceptible to “myths” (2 Timothy 4:4)

It has been said that a church's claim to be relevant is something akin to a person's claim to be humble. If you have to tell people that you're humble, then, you're probably not. Similarly, if a church has to market itself to the world as being relevant, that is probably evidence of some psychological angst about its relevancy. Then, as it pursues the world's blessing of being declared "relevant," it emphasizes that which may be highly practical in the temporal realm, but is only quite fleeting in the eternal realm.

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" - Matthew 8:36

The gospel in its fullness is God's "power of salvation" (Romans 1:16). What could possibly be more relevant than the eternal salvation of one's soul? I don't know that it is even within the scope of human cleverness to make the Gospel any more relevant than it inherently is already.

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