

Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Culture

The Challenge of Social Gospelism: How the culture sees the church

Intro: There are so many challenges for the church to face in our time. Most of them grow out the changed worldview that has developed over the past century and has gained critical mass in the past generation. Again and again we can see how the church has responded to the pressure of changing cultural attitudes. We have seen it in the church's changed attitude in the last generation toward the role of women or the acceptance of homosexual relationships.

One author recently noted that "the church" (i.e. Christendom at large) had "gained a reputation for reacting, copying and generally riding the second wave of original movements reverberating through culture." He said that as a criticism of the church always being behind the times rather than leading the way; but I'd say that what he said is essentially the problem. If the religious world is "riding the second wave of original movements reverberating through the culture," it is in fact allowing the culture to redefine its agenda and mission.

One area where the church has been particularly vulnerable is in the how the church perceives its mission. For centuries the church thought of itself primarily as the agency to dispense the message of the gospel to a lost world; but alas today...

The preaching of the gospel has no seeming relevance in the world view of the 21st century secular culture.

In an earlier lesson I demonstrated the shift in worldview that has taken place in our culture; and we saw four principles of the secularist world view:

- Matter/energy is the ultimate reality.
- Humans are autonomous and self-actualizing.
- All moral values are relative, not absolute.
- Human law abrogates and replaces divine law.

What these principles do is undermine the foundational tenets of the gospel.

- The gospel presumes accountability to a just God; but secularism denies His existence.
- The gospel affirms a divine purpose in the creation leading to final judgment; but secularism affirms that humans shape their own destiny without God.
- The gospel teaches the reality of sin as rebellion against the will of the creator resulting in condemnation; moral relativism makes preaching against sin irrelevant and intolerant.
- The gospel affirms the need for humans to be saved; secularism denies the need of salvation except in the society's perceived need to rescue someone from what the world considers bad behavior.

So then what would the secular culture have the church to do?

The secular culture would say the church should become more tolerant and tone down its perceived judgmentalism or propensity for declaring certain behaviors “wrong.”

The culture would say, “Doctrines of eternal rewards and punishments are passé. Quit talking about final judgment and eternal outcomes of heaven or hell, and start talking about how to improve life on earth.”

The culture would say, “If the church wants to do something relevant, either relieve the conditions which society considers contributing to bad behavior like poverty or serve as a counseling agency to those whose behavior is unacceptable.

And so instead of a mission to preach the gospel, which includes God’s wrath against sin and God’s solution in the cross, the church should abandon such irrelevant activities and focus more on improving the world around it. This is essentially the message of the social gospel which has replaced the spiritual gospel of the first-century church.

So how should the church respond?

The church can cater to the culture, seeking to make itself “relevant” in the eyes of the secular world around it.

I was intrigued by an article I read recently in “Relevant Magazine” that spoke about how the church would be “relevant” in the next generation. Various popular or high profile church leaders were queried about what the church would need to do to take the initiative in becoming more “relevant” to the next generation. Their responses generated a list that is quite revealing. (I debated in my own mind about whether I should share these quotes, since it adds significant length to my lessons. But I finally determined to let you hear for yourself what people are saying.)

1. We’ll need to prove the value of the local church as a social institution.

To maintain credibility among nonbelievers, churchgoers will have to defend their allegiance to a “religious institution” by pointing to tangible ways in which their congregation is making the community a better place to live. (Hal Donaldson, founder of Christian humanitarian organization Convoy of Hope)

2. We’ll need to expand our capacity to love at the same lightning rate of technological advances.

Essentially the idea from this worship leader was that the church ensure that technological presentations don’t get in the way of personal expressions of faith.

3. We’ll need to reclaim the broken institution of marriage.

The author rightly noted that marriages among churchgoers has not been significantly different in the past generation; thus the church has contributed to the

breakdown of the home and the social problems that attend it.

4. We'll need to pull the plug on cynicism.

Noting the significant amount of cynicism toward religious institutions, the author offers a solution: *“Extravagant love isn't satisfied just dangling its feet over the water in people's lives; it grabs its knees and does a cannonball. Grab your knees often—do it every day—and dive into people's lives in creative and winsome ways. If someone's having a lousy day, send them a pizza. Mail them a dozen baby ducks. Get a bread machine in your office, and just give warm bread to people—and give them real butter, not margarine. (From Bob Goff, author of Love Does and founder of Restore International)*

5. We'll need to answer the growing concerns about immigration.

“My husband and I believe God has entrusted these families to us and to our ministry, and we have felt compelled—despite criticism—to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. (From Lynne Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago)

6. We'll need to push beyond conventional categories to engage the rise of the “nones.”

The “nones” refers to those without religious affiliation. Shane Hippen explains the reason for that this way: *That's because the cultural shift now underway is not merely about music preferences or the use of video clips in sermons. The problem is deeper, found in the language patterns and theological categories we use to articulate faith. Put simply, evangelicals will increasingly have answers to questions no one is asking. The failure to face this challenge will firmly secure this kind of Christianity in the margins of history and society. To avoid this, we must learn to embrace what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “religionless Christianity.” These people will press beyond the tired religious categories of “liberal” and “conservative.” They will see the life and teachings of Jesus not as religious or even spiritual in nature, but rather as fundamentally human. (From Shane Hippen, author of Selling Water by the River and Flickering Pixels)*

7. We'll need to pioneer a third way forward in politics.

Abortion, health care, poverty, gun violence and more must be addressed because they inevitably impact

quality of life. However, these are extremely charged political topics. Many [Christians] are silent on issues we need to speak on because we don't want to be identified with some of the radicalism demonstrated by some of those groups. Christians must reclaim the conversation and refuse to allow our voices to be minimized and held hostage by political camps. Our challenge will be discovering ways to do so that supersedes the fray of political partisan bickering and uncivil, un-Christian discourse. (From Dharius Daniels, founding pastor of Kingdom Church in Ewing, N.J.)

8. We'll need to kick out the cliché of the fallen leader.

What I believe is going to be most needed in this country and in the Church over the next 10 years is moral leadership—leadership that is characterized by truthfulness and justice and righteousness, not self-righteousness. We now live in a culture that is characterized by spin. Politicians, pastors and Christian leaders lie, so what else is new? (From Sarah Sumner, former dean of A.W. Tozer Theological Seminary and author of Leadership Above the Line)

9. We'll need to redefine climate change as not only an environmental issue, but also a human issue.

Because changing weather patterns can make people vulnerable to loss and even death, we must stake out a position on global warming or the more deceptive term "climate change."

10. We'll need to inaugurate the "Pro-Life Movement 2.0."

We live in a nation where gun violence kills 10,000 people a year, where the death penalty kills dozens a year to try and show that killing is wrong, where military spending is over 20,000 a second, where we have the capacity of 100,000 Hiroshimas in our arsenal. It is time for a movement of Christians to interrupt the patterns of violence with the love we see on the cross.

The culture wars of our parents have left us polarized by party platforms and paralyzed between imperfect options. There is no Life Party, but maybe one is emerging. Convinced that every human life is breathed upon by God and stamped with God's image, we are on the cusp of a new movement of Christians who insist on protecting life in all its dazzling forms. It is a movement we have already begun but one whose work I hope we can finish out.

I hope that we can decrease and eliminate abortion, embrace the immigrant and orphans, end the death penalty in the U.S. and see poor people cared for. Some might say we should “be realistic.” We say, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not yet see” (Hebrews 11:1). (From Shane Claiborne, author of Irresistible Revolution and founding member of the Simple Way in Philadelphia, Penn.)

I don't know about you; but what I hear in this list is by and large church leaders who advocate for church activism in the social and political arena. The church becomes something of a hybrid marriage of the Red Cross and a political action committee, giving stuff away and expressing opinions about the social issues of the day.

But more troubling for me: It assumes that the church is only relevant to the extent that it takes up the secularist agenda and works within it. Is this what we must do to be relevant in our world?

The church can proclaim the counter-cultural message of Jesus and His apostles.

It is obvious that the Lord and His apostles faced the same kind of world we live in, one with social ills of various kinds. It was a world war, of imperial power and human trafficking, a world of slavery, crime, poverty, and social division.

I submit that they possessed neither the organization nor the financial wherewithal to significantly remove these social ills. If this was their mission, then they were entirely unequipped to do it and utterly failed to accomplish it. In fact, it does not even appear that they made any effort to eradicate these things as such.

But I suggest that what they did do was far more effective in ultimately removing them. And so we ask, “What did the NT church do? What did they perceive to be their mission?”

They recognized that most of what is wrong in the world can be attributed to human sin.

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”
(Romans 3:23)

The apostles addressed this fundamental issue. They did not enlist the brethren into a campaign against the swords or knives that took people's lives; but rather they sought to bring about repentance in the thieves and the murderers that used such things to abuse others.

They spoke with conviction about the authority of God's law and human accountability to it.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds

in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The apostles made no effort to psychoanalyze the Greco-Roman population, offering some justification for why a certain group acted out. They held people personal accountable for their actions and appealed to them to accept responsibility in view of the eternal judgment.

They prioritized the salvation of souls from sin.

The apostles had heard these word from the Lord Himself:

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” (Mark 16:15–16)

They made this their foremost passion, to proclaim the good news of the reign of God through Jesus Christ.

They proclaimed the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus as the only remedy for sin.

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;” (Romans 3:21–24)

For the apostles the ultimate solution to the problem of sin was for sinners to acknowledge their lost condition, place themselves at the mercy of God’s forgiveness.

They encouraged acceptance of God’s kingdom (rule) through faith, repentance, and obedience to the gospel.

“And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

The apostles made no effort to buy converts. So far as I know they never sent anybody a dozen baby ducks! Instead they tried to help people understand that the greatest gift they could ever receive had already been made available to them through the love of God.

They encouraged God’s people to model moral excellence in all relationships.

“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they

observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:12)

It may be here that we might best show how the church makes a community better—not by creating organizations to hand out stuff or offer counsel, but rather to change people in their hearts and give them reason to submit to the Lordship of Jesus.

They lived in hope of the consummation when God would separate the righteous from the wicked.

“But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:13)

I know there are those who contend for an earthly consummation to the kingdom of God; but it would appear that the apostles were not set upon trying to make heaven on earth, but rather prepare people on earth for heaven. They knew that this world was coming to an end. They did not see in that permission to trash the planet; but it led them to set their sights on something greater than this earth.

There are clear differences in these two approaches.

There is a difference in how the world may respond.

Today’s social gospel approach may make the church more “liked” by removing the condemnation of sin and affirming God’s acceptance of all.

The NT approach may make the church hated for its condemnation of the world’s transgressions; but this would be in harmony with the experience of Jesus and the early church.

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18–19)

Has it ever dawned on these social gospelers that if the NT church was like what they advocated, why would anyone have ever opposed them?

There is a difference in the kind of people we may attract.

The social gospel approach will draw an endless stream of takers who will gladly use the church as an ATM for whatever needs they think they have.

The NT approach may turn off many of these people, but it will attract those who are seeking God and a right relationship with him. We might well remember here the words of the apostle John:

“And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. “For everyone who does evil hates the light,

and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”” (John 3:19–21)

There is a difference in the outcome of the two approaches.

The social gospel approach may make the physical lives of people better here; but may do nothing to prepare souls for eternity. How many times have we gathered up a contribution for people in the name of Jesus who never returned to give Him glory much less show appreciation to the people who sacrificed to help them?

The NT approach may provide people with a hope that will enable them to overcome difficult physical circumstances, but more importantly give them access to the eternal kingdom of God. If you must do a “cannonball jump” into someone’s life, I suggest you really make a splash, not by giving them warm bread with butter, but rather giving them Jesus, the true bread that comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.

What we need is not the timid love and seeks to make everyone like us by giving them what they want, but rather that bold love that seeks to give them what they desperately need, even if they don’t know that they want it or need it!

Conclusion: Every Christian has to come to terms with whether or not he/she wants to please the world around him or the Lord above him.