

Did Jesus Call Us to Be Relevant?

Last week, Michael Paulson of *The New York Times* asked **Pastor Brian Houston**, founder of the Hillsong movement (which now has congregations in California and New York), “Can your pastors preside at same-sex marriages?”

Pastor Houston replied (in part), “It can be challenging for churches to stay relevant. Because many mainstream churches upheld what they would believe is the long established view of what the Bible says about homosexuality. But the world has changed around and about them.”

He continued, “So the world’s changing and we want to stay relevant as a church. So that’s a vexing thing. You think, ‘How do we not become a pariah?’”

These are understandable concerns, since, if we are driving people away from Jesus, we can hardly bring them to Jesus.

Unfortunately, when speaking to the *Times*, Pastor Houston did not make a clear statement as to what he believed the Bible did say about gay “marriage,” drawing a firestorm of criticism.

Thankfully, before the week was out, Pastor Houston issued a follow-up statement, saying, “Nowhere in my answer did I diminish biblical truth or suggest that I or Hillsong Church supported **gay marriage**. ... My personal view on the subject of homosexuality would line up with most traditionally held Christian views. I believe the writings of Paul are clear on this subject.”

Given the powerful influence Hillsong has today, and given the tremendous contribution to worship that their songwriters have made, I was extremely glad to see Pastor Houston make this

declaration.

But what to do we make of the emphasis Pastor Houston put on being relevant? As he explained in his statement, “this struggle for relevance was vexing as we did not want to become ostracized by a world that needs Christ.”

On the one hand, I totally affirm his heart to remove every possible stumbling block that could stand in the way of our witness to the lost. This was Paul’s method as well, as he explained, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22, ESV).

This means that we use cultural sensitivity and do our best to speak a language that people understand, always being motivated by love for God and love for souls.

Obviously, **Hillsong** has been very successful in doing this.

At the same time, there is a tremendous danger in our pursuit of “relevance,” since what the world thinks it needs is not always what it really needs, nor do God’s methods mirror our methods.

As Paul wrote in the very same letter to the Corinthians, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

All too often—and I say this for all of us, not specifically for Hillsong—being “relevant” can become the code word for compromise, and whenever we seek to make the gospel more palatable by watering it down and removing its offensive elements, we hurt people rather than help them.

Looking at this from another angle, if Christians through the ages had put more emphasis on relevance than obedience, they would not have been mocked, rejected, imprisoned or killed for

their faith.

As Jesus said to His followers, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" (Matt. 10:24-25).

He also said to them (and us!), "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (John 15:18-20).

I do not hear Jesus saying here, "Be relevant!"

Responding to Pastor Houston's comments to *The New York Times*, Andrew Walker wrote that "as Christians, we don't get to define what 'relevant' means in terms that are unquestioning of what our culture means by 'relevant.'"

In fact, he feels that a wrong emphasis on relevance can put us in retreat, noting that, "A church in retreat doesn't give answers. It doesn't storm the gates of Hell. It settles and makes peace where there is no peace (Ezek. 13:10)."

Walker then calls all of us to live like the church in exile, "one that is faithful amidst the culture, regardless of whether that culture looks more like America or more like Babylon. It knows that it may lose the culture, but that it cannot lose the gospel. So be it. ...

"The good news," he writes, "is that the truth of Christianity outlasts the untruths of man's applause."

When the Lord graciously saved me in 1971 as a 16-year-old, heroin-shooting, LSD-using, Jewish hippie, rock drummer, my entire world consisted of drugs and rock music and ungodly behavior, and my friends and I lived for getting high, going to rock concerts and playing with our band.

My daily music revolved around songs like Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused" and Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze," yet the Lord saved my friends and I in a little, Italian Pentecostal church where the men wore ties and the ladies wore dresses and the pastor's wife played old hymns on the piano.

But the Lord's presence was so real and His Word so clear that we were all wonderfully born again in a totally foreign setting. Is there a lesson for us here?

I personally love contemporary worship, and I appreciate fine musicianship and gifted singers, as well as having an ethic for doing things with excellence. The Lord can certainly use this too.

But it's so easy to put our emphasis in the wrong places, as if slick presentation was more important than the Spirit and professionalism was more important than the Presence.

Let us always be careful not to put relevance before obedience and not to water down the Word in order to avoid offense.

Put another way, we must not use the shifting tides of culture and the fickle opinions of people as our guide for life and ministry. Instead, we must seek to emulate Jesus in thought, word and deed, lifting Him up without shame (which includes lifting up His life-giving standards of holiness and purity). If we do, the hungry and thirsty will come.

Pastor Kris Vallotton put it well: "We are not called to reflect our culture we are called to transform it. Becoming darkness to be relevant to a world of immorality is not the pathway to progress, but the process to the cesspool of

hopelessness.

"We must lovingly reach into the cesspool of society and dirty our hands with the souls men as we pull them into the light of His extravagant grace."

Speaking of the early church, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "The church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."

That is what Jesus has called us to do and to be, changing the world, not becoming like it.

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