

The Problem With Being Relevant

It always excites me to see churches on the cutting edge of technology, ones structurally organized for growth and doing everything they can to make their houses user-friendly. This is refreshing to me, because it shows God is presented in the most excellent way.

From the parking lot to the reserved seating for guests, all of the checkpoints of welcome are marked off. The proof is in the growth, from multiple services to multiple sites. Many of these churches definitely have what I call the “relevant factor”!

But are they changing the world? People are coming, so God must be pleased, right? Offering plates are full, so God must be pleased, right? The messages are catchy and visual, so God must be pleased, right?

Looking deeper, you sometimes find conviction is no longer needed because the cross took care of that. You learn grace is preached as separation from the cross instead of an invitation to its transformation. Churches rarely speak of Holy Spirit fire these days because they fear the masses won’t like such a vision of freedom. We are, after all, living in a day where services are on a timer and where altar calls are for those who haven’t figured it out yet.

Given all this, I’m forced to wonder if being relevant is simply a way to fire the Holy Spirit from His job so things will never get messy. That’s much easier than deliverance—because deliverance is never easy, and true discipleship is more than a six-month journey. In a day of celebrity-driven platforms, where pulpit substance is neither needed nor desired and a nonconfrontational message of hope

fills the pulpit, maybe we have realized church is just an experience and not an encounter with God.

Is God pleased? Really?

Beware the Times

We are living in very serious, unprecedented times, where truth is considered hate speech and the Bible is considered out of date. We are living in a day where Christians are told to be quiet lest we offend someone and where “secular Christianity” is the new norm.

The apostle Paul warned Timothy of these days, saying, “Don’t be naive. There are difficult times ahead. As the end approaches, people are going to be self-absorbed, money-hungry, self-promoting, stuck-up, profane, contemptuous of parents, crude, coarse, dog-eat-dog, unbending, slanderers, impulsively wild, savage, cynical, treacherous, ruthless, bloated windbags, addicted to lust, and allergic to God. They’ll make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they’re animals. Stay clear of these people” (2 Tim. 3:1-5, MSG).

With all that’s happening, our only recourse is to reinvent how we do church, right? We must make ourselves more relevant, right?

Maybe the apostle Paul saw this day coming as well when he wrote, “Don’t fool yourself. Don’t think that you can be wise merely by being up-to-date with the times. Be God’s fool—that’s the path to true wisdom. What the world calls smart, God calls stupid. It’s written in Scripture, He exposes the chicanery of the chic. The Master sees through the smoke screens of the know-it-alls” (1 Cor. 3:18-20).

I remember what one spiritual father in my life told me about being relevant. He said, “*Relevant* means ‘connection with the subject at issue.’ If the subject at issue is the Great Commission, given by Jesus to His church, and the church is

connected to that subject, then relevant is still in and will be until He returns. When the church loses the connection to that issue, then the church becomes irrelevant.”

Is it possible for the church to be both relevant and a place of true encounter? I think so! But the church at large is at a crossroads right now—too many have embraced being relevant and have abandoned the critical role of transforming souls into God’s kingdom, which needs to be priority one.

Beware the Flesh

Why would we rob this generation of a genuine encounter with God like the one we had when we first began this amazing journey? Could it be we are in a compassion crisis—that we love people’s acceptance so much we aren’t willing to tell them the truth that would rescue their souls? It’s at the altar of redemption and not at the table of man’s knowledge where man finds freedom.

It’s easier to stand and declare who we are because we have lost sight of who *He is*. It’s easier to say, “Look at me,” because if you say, “Look at God,” people may realize we don’t look much like Him. So we reduce God down to a concept of love and compassion but ignore holiness, righteousness and mercy.

Truly, this should not be.

Our song services arouse emotions and stir hearts like never before in history—but what about God’s Word? Jesus never watered down the gospel—in fact, He turned water into wine!

One morning while praying, I heard the Holy Spirit say to me, “Pat, there’s been a demonic onslaught sent from hell to make Christian leaders believe they must live like the world to win the world.” Our message is no longer clear that sin is sin and that God is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6, NKJV). We preach tolerance instead of the wages of sin because socially it is received better.

But it's important to heed what my friend, pastor Steve Smothermon, said to me one day. He said, "Tolerance is a belief in nothing." When we preach tolerance without declaring truth, he said, we have set ourselves up to never set a boundary. We also will give an account for not being true to our calling.

Beware the Atmosphere

Please understand me: I believe understanding and love are critical to touching lives—after all, it is God's goodness that leads men to repentance (Rom. 2:4). But when do we give people a chance to repent? In the coffee bar? A small group? An encounter weekend that takes place three times a year? These are all amazing places to grow deep in God, but we are living in a day where twice-a-month churchgoers must experience encounters when they actually come to church or they will be swept away by the lies of the enemy.

I love passionate and alive services that are relevant, and I speak year-round at youth conferences being used by God to literally transform a generation. But I have often wondered if we are dangerously close to looking like a club.

What do I mean? I mean that if we are simply producing services with no conviction—if we are churning out lots of cool atmosphere but don't lead people to transformation—would it not be better to just go to any downtown club in any major city? While I love to be in an atmosphere of excitement, lights, sound and stage like the next person, that doesn't mean we should sacrifice truth for relevance. If we can combine a great atmosphere with a powerful and true encounter, then we will win.

To sacrifice conviction for the thrill of an experience negates our purpose. I often wonder if we are raising up a Saul generation that likes worship more than God's Word because it soothes one's demons. Maybe that's what Jesus meant

when He said, "Worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

What God Can Do

I love it when the Holy Spirit invades a room and we see hundreds or thousands run to the altar without invitation. I always stand in awe that God has the power to interrupt the messenger and do more in seconds than we could accomplish in years. That is why we call our places of worship *sanctuaries*. We must allow the Holy Spirit to move freely and inhabit God's temples.

But don't forget, you and I are temples of the Holy Spirit too (1 Cor. 6:19-20)! God inhabits our lives and makes them His home. He chooses to enter us and produce a life of power, freedom and authority in us. Without a Holy Spirit encounter, we will become dried-up religious institutions.

If we aren't going to lead people to change, we may as well shut the doors. Malachi 1:10 reads, "'Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will accept no offering from your hands'" (NIV).

I'm reminded of a picture I saw of a worship service in the Philippines where people stood in knee-deep water praising God in the midst of death and destruction around them. The only relevance for these warriors of Christ was that God was—and is—still in control.

Maybe relevance in God's eyes is about preparing His bride for secret encounters and private glances from a heavenly Father who has been with them in the good and the bad. Could it be more than a superficial presentation—creating an atmosphere where heaven invades earth? Where truth is declared in love? Where the weary are refreshed? Where the lost are found?

My friend Joel Stockstill told me recently, "The day of the

consumer-driven model has run its course, and the day of God-breathed, presence-driven, crying-out-to-God ministries has arrived. God forbid that the heavenly encounters paid for on the cross would be boiled down to a 45-minute run sheet and a service devoid of God's Spirit."

We must be God's voice and not forego biblical truth with conviction. We must not blur the lines between the world and those called to the cross.

Enough is enough! Remember what James 4:7-10 says: "So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud *no* to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and He'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet" (MSG).

When I walk into heaven, I don't believe God will ask me how cool my services were or how large my gatherings were. He will simply allow His fire to judge my work (1 Cor. 3:13). So the fire we have tried to avoid in our services will be on display in the greatest church service of all time.

I wonder what would happen if every congregational leader stood up one Sunday, bypassed the order of service and declared a holy call to repentance in the sight of God. The world is spinning out of control and needs a church that will bring it back to repentance. This generation desires the depth of God's truth and not just the crumbs found under the table. God has not called us to shrink back! Will you respond to the call, church?

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