

# IS THE GOSPEL CULTURALLY RELEVANT?



*“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”-Romans 12:2*

*“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”-2 Cor 5:18-19*

In this article, I will pose and answer a simple question, *‘Is the gospel of Jesus Christ culturally relevant?’*

It's popular for churches to boast that their message, methods, or both, are *culturally relevant*. Incidentally, the compound term *cultural relevance* is never used in the Bible, though we hear it used often today. What is meant by this statement, "cultural relevance?" "Culture" simply means the accepted characteristics, features, and modes of behavior common to a particular class of people. What about *relevance*? The word *relevant* literally means to relieve, to raise up, or to advance. So literally speaking, to be relevant then, is to, as it were, meet the challenge at hand, to be fitting and appropriate for the situation. Of course, in this sense, the gospel is indeed relevant, and yes, culturally relevant. It meets every need, of any person, in every generation, in any culture, who will by faith respond to its claims and demands. Indeed, the gospel is timeless. Jesus is never out-of-date, He is never old-fashioned, and He is always relevant in this way.

However, as with many words, relevance can be used in another sense, rendering a slightly different but kindred meaning. According to the dictionary, relevance can also mean to relate. It's in this sense that the modern "church-growth, seeker-sensitive" movements coin their phrase, "culturally relevant." In his message, "Seven Commitments Of The Relevant," Pastor Brian Houston of trendy Hillsong Church declares...

*“Relevance can be defined as 'connected to what is happening; useful or suitable for a purpose.' To be*

*relevant requires us to be connected to the world we live in, and to be useful and suitable for God's purpose. The question we as Christians should constantly ask ourselves is this: Are we connected to the world around us? Are we useful to the world outside the church?" -Brian Houston*

Notice the subtle shift in emphasis: Are we connected and useful? So, instead of declaring that the gospel is sufficient to meet every human need, the implication is we must relate to our sinful culture.

*"Every person deserves to have the Good News of Christ communicated in a way that they can clearly understand and relate to. That communication includes relevant language, culture and music. While the message never changes, the methods must adapt in every generation. Therefore, we are determined to learn how to live out our faith in a culturally relevant way, while building bridges of communication to society for Christ's sake." -Dr. Hank Brooks, Pastor - Coastal Community Church*

This, in essence, turns the gospel on its head.

*"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." -Prov 16:25*

It is true, we are obligated to communicate, but I don't need to immerse myself in a worldly culture to do so. In this post, I want to give you two Biblical reasons why the gospel will never be culturally relevant as defined by the modern church.

## **FIRST, WE ARE FORBIDDEN TO BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD**

*"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." -Romans 12:2*

This may shock you, but God, is not interested in impressing our culture. His command to us, as Christians, is to: "Reveal my Son, preach my Word." The Bible is clear, we can never do this by succumbing, in any way, to the world's practices or philosophies.

*"Any spirit that permits compromise with the world is a false spirit. Any religious movement that imitates the world in any of its manifestations is false to the cross of Christ and on the side of the devil." -A.W. Tozer*

Whether we understand or not, the Scriptures warn us that winning the world's approval will, more often than not, send them to hell. However, the modern church is crippled with an identity crisis. She fails to seek the praise that comes from God alone, so

therefore, pines away yearning for the world's "amen." At one time, we were constrained by love, but now we are driven by success.

*"The Church that I see is a Church of influence. A Church so large in size that the city and nation cannot ignore it. A Church growing so quickly that buildings struggle to contain the increase."*  
- Brian Houston

Therefore, instead of purity, pragmatism is the reigning motive. And relevance is essential to the formula. What else drives men to ask, *'Are we relating to our culture?'*

*"There is no greater fallacy than to think that you need a gospel for special types of people."* -D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

When this thought is accepted, culture has usurped the Word of God as our ultimate authority.

*"I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."*  
-The Apostle Paul referring to his experience as a Pharisee, (Acts 26:9)

Again, Pastor Brian Houston of the popular Hillsong Church says...

*"...experience things from their point of view. Sadly, the Church is often seen to be always imposing their view on the world. Being relevant requires us not to be judgmental, but rather seeing the world with understanding and moved with compassion...Instead of being narrow-minded, let us be embracing with a breadth and a depth that draws the world to Jesus."*

This perfectly communicates the modern concept of relevance. Terrifying words indeed.

What about 1 Corinthians 9:22?

*"...I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."* -1 Cor. 9:22

If this is not a proof text for the modern doctrine of relevance, what does it mean? It simply means we're debtors to give men Jesus, we're to deny ourselves, rightly represent Him that the gospel can be heard. This is all. Today, they suppose we must re-invent the church, the gospel, and its methods to move forward and to interest our generation.

*"A new kind of Christian for a new kind of age,"* they say.

However, my KJV, 1611 warns...

*“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. “-1 Cor. 1:18*

When you look at the Scriptures as well as Christian history, the church always goes forward by first going back. In times of spiritual ineffectiveness or stagnation, re-invention is not what we need, but revival.

*“Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.”  
-Jeremiah 6:16*

Sadly, today we are bound by the present, fascinated with the future, but oh, so careless about the past. The question is not, "is our message and method relevant for our culture?" but rather, "is our culture relevant to God?" We do well to remember Jesus declared...

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” -John 14:6*

Jesus is the way, therefore, He is the method. Jesus is the truth, therefore, He is the message. Thus, if we preach the message according to the Biblical method we will enjoy divine life. This is the test of faith. We must never divorce the method/way from the message/truth. If we do, we forfeit divine life. It is the curse of pluralism that declares there are many ways; many ways to God or many ways to serve Jesus, or many ways to preach, etc. The Bible teaches no such thing...

*“Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” -Matthew 7:14*

Moreover, it is unscriptural to expect the gospel of Christ to relate to any sinful culture...

*“If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.” -John 15:18*

*“But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost...” -2 Cor. 4:3*

*“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” -Hebrews 13:8*

Yet, these new methods and modes are taught with such sincerity that it causes us to

sometimes question the Word. Yes, seemingly sincere, but underneath the religious facade, many times there is a secret love for the world.

## **SECONDLY, WE ARE GIVEN THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION**

*“...and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” -2 Cor. 5:18-19*

As “ambassadors for Christ” we have been entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation.

*“...be ye reconciled to God.” -2 Cor. 5:20*

This is the substance of our message (*and notice the language is not delicately couched in a suggestion but communicated boldly as a command*). However, the message and ministry of reconciliation is no call to diplomacy.

In *Strong’s Greek Dictionary*, ‘reconciliation, means to *restore to divine favor by means of faith in the atonement*.

In the natural, an ambassador may indeed use diplomacy to settle differences between two equal and legitimate parties. But in times of war he will never compromise with the enemy. No, he simply delivers his nation's message. Consider the American government's message to the Islamic Fundamentalist, "we will not negotiate with terrorist." As ambassadors for Christ, we represent the Kingdom of God, and its culture. The kingdom of darkness is not a legitimate entity, as sinners are rebels against the Kingdom of God. Hence, our message is "REPENT OR PERISH." Reconciliation is the act of bringing two opposing parties to peaceful terms. This is impossible apart from a change. Hence, we cannot promote reconciliation without preaching repentance. And, we cannot preach repentance without exposing sin. Someone is wrong, someone is guilty, someone should be ashamed, and someone must change. Now, remember, the Holy Ghost comes to reprove the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:8).

*“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord...” -Isaiah 1:18*

The first order of business with God is to deal with men on a moral, rather than intellectual plane. We cannot be “ambassadors for the Kingdom of God” if we speak with soothing tones to appease rebels. For example, if we witness to a sodomite, we are not representing the Kingdom of God if we say, “God accepts you just the way you

are.” Or if we preach to drunkards, failing to communicate God's mind, and leaving them with their delusions, “Jesus drank a little wine too.” And remember, like Christ defines the Christian, so sin defines the sinner. For both the sodomite and the drunkard, God has a direct word.

*“...they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” -Galatians 5:21*

## **THIS IS GOD’S WORD, HIS MIND ON THIS SUBJECT, THIS IS WHAT HE WANTS SAID!**

To an atheist, we can never say, “Jesus understands how difficult it is to believe what you can't see.”

No, no, God's mind is clear...

*“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” -Psalm 53:1*

Why can't we simply believe God desires His Word to be spoken and applied? As ambassadors, we can never accurately represent a God of whom we are ashamed.

*“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” -2 Tim. 4:2*

Sadly, many, today, are embarrassed of the God of the Bible. Furthermore, as ambassadors, we are called to reconcile the world to God, not God to the world. We cannot alter God's character so as to make Him more appealing to the sinful nature.

*“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” -Isaiah 53:3*

The promotion of a culturally relevant gospel is nothing more than compromise. Sadly, this proves the vast majority of those who profess Christianity are ashamed of the person of God. We must not be alarmed with all the clamor, when we refuse to dim the light the darkness will rage. Yes, Jesus' gospel is relevant, but it will never be culturally accepted. Thus, the doctrine of cultural relevance is not only a redefining of terms, but unscriptural as well. Let us pray that God would protect us from such carnal reasoning.

—B.W.