

## Three critical errors in the modern church – Part 2

Some Christian leaders believe we are in the age of post-Christian evangelicalism. That's a frightening term – post-Christian evangelicalism. What it means is that the evangelical church, the church that claims to preach salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for God's glory alone, is increasingly no longer doing that, and can scarcely be called the church anymore.

There is no doubt that it is a religion, but its resemblance to New Testament Christianity is fading all the time. It has instead become a strange mix of religious entertainment, of worldly amusements themed around Jesus Christ – a spiritual chameleon that changes its colours depending on its environment. It has no fixed bearings, no absolutes the anchor it, it is truly a boat tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by every cultural innovation, by every whim and pleasure of the unsaved.

How the church got to this sad place is not something that can be covered in a few paragraphs. However, I suggest in this three-part series that there are three critical errors the church has made, and in my opinion, continues to make, in its relationship with the world. I named these errors as believing that respectability or competence equals authority, believing that size equals influence, and believing that reflection equals relevance.

In Part 1, we looked at the first error. Now let's unpack the second error – believing that size equals influence. Now, like the last error, there is a faint glimmer of a good motive contained here. The church wants to influence the world correctly. This is part of our mandate. Jesus told us as much in no uncertain terms:

*You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

**Matthew 5:13-16**

Salt makes a difference. Light illuminates what is, and guides people. It is obvious we are to make a difference. We are to influence the world. What's more is that Jesus made it clear that He wanted this influence to be everywhere. At the close of nearly every Gospel (and start of Acts), we have Jesus emphasising that His message of salvation from sin was to not remain in Jerusalem but spread to all the corners of the globe.

*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*

**Matthew 28:19**

*And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.*

**Mark 16:15**

*Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."*

*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*

Acts 1:8

The implication is obvious – Jesus expected the church to have a large influence on the world. He did not want a parochial, provincial influence. He expected the news of His death and resurrection and atonement to be carried to the ends of the earth. And it did. As early as **Acts 17:6** we read: *“The hostile unbelievers in Thessalonica say of the Christians: ‘These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.’”*

So the church is right in wanting a large and pervasive influence, since Jesus commanded that. And the church is right in continuing to send missionaries to unreached peoples, in continuing to plant evangelical churches where there are few or none. The Great Commission has not been completed. But here again is where a subtle but sloppy kind of thinking shifts the focus from a Biblical one to an improvised, novel one. Influence is not the same thing as size.

The church has more or less bought wholesale the idea that size equals influence. In other words, the bigger you are, the more influence you can – and in their thinking, *will* – have. By bigger they mean bigger churches with more members, ideally mega-churches with thousands attending – by implication very wealthy churches with large financial reserves to spend on missionaries, printing and publishing works, audio and video content channels.

They mean podcasts and social media stations that must have a huge subscription bases, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and growing. They mean television and media stations with viewership that must range in the millions. They mean Christian books and websites whose sales or hits must be in the millions.

And being a generation enslaved to the power of numbers and statistics, when the numbers are up – the church’s eyes light up with glee, thinking, ‘That means our influence is up!’ In fact, ‘We’re reaching more people’ is the almost inevitable mantra of the evangelical church.

But are we? Do the numbers mean we are influencing more people? For some even asking the question seems absurd. It is as simple as cause and effect. More numbers is more people which is more influence.

And the problem comes again in a failure to define our terms. Just like many people do not take time to define authority to see its difference from competence, many do not take time to define influence, so as to see its difference from numerical size.

### **Size versus influence**

Size has to do with the *number* of people attending your services, your financial resources, your supposed listenership, readership, viewership or sales. It is a quantifiable number of people. But all that those numbers reveal is how many are listening, watching, viewing or reading. It does not tell us anything about how those experiences are changing them. And *that* is influence.

Influence is a qualitative thing. You can’t measure it with statistics. Influence is similar to authority. But whereas authority has to do with the power of the Word *through the messenger*, influence has to do with the power of the Word on the listener. Influence is the sway, the effect of the Word, when preached with authority.

I might report that 100 000 people attended a certain political rally. Does that mean that all 100 000 were supportive of that party? I might report that a particular nation has the largest population on earth. Does that mean they could field the largest army on earth? Not necessarily – perhaps 70% of the nation are women and children. Numbers cannot give a clear picture of influence – and especially of spiritual influence. One of the clearest passages on the influence of God's Word through His servants is in 2 Corinthians:

*Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.*

**2 Corinthians 2:14-17**

A wonderful metaphor for influence is the idea of a fragrance, an odour. As believers live and act and work in the world, God diffuses the fragrance of Christ to all. This is influence. And notice – the reaction is not universally positive. To some, the influence is a stench – we are the aroma of death. To others, it is the aroma of life. But Paul says, we do not corrupt or peddle the Word of God – we preach it in sincerity, regardless of the reaction.

Here we get close to what God means by influencing the world. Preach the Word, live the Word. Diffuse the knowledge of Christ with your lips and your life. The responses are going to be varied – there will be conviction of sin in some. There will be rejection in others. There will be submission in some. There will be repentance in some.

In some, there will be changed lives – changed attitudes, changed marriages, changed speech, changed behaviour, changed priorities. This is influence. This is the power of the Word. As **2 Timothy 3:16-17** describes, it is profitable to teach, to reprove to correct, to train – so as to thoroughly equip and complete the one who yields to it.

Jesus' analogy of the salt and light adds to this. Salt both brought out the flavour of a meal, and was used as a preservative in that culture. It enhanced food and it protected food. Light shows the way. Light reveals what is. Now you can reject what that light shows, and still go your own way. You can also refuse the salt and leave your food bland. But it is there to serve the purpose of making a difference.

Hopefully by now you can see why numerical statistics reflecting size cannot capture or reveal influence. On paper, the numbers lie. You might have 6000 people attending your church, but the Word is only influencing about 100 of them to truly change. You might have a church of 200, and be influencing 150 of them to change. Which church has the greater influence?

Or you may have a church of 10 000 made up of materialistic, carnal individuals who don't care much at all for their neighbours and never share the Gospel. Or you may have a church of 50 where everyone is zealous for Christ and seeks to show Christ to their friends, neighbours, colleagues and family. Who has a greater influence on their communities? The statistics will not tell you the truth.

You might have a podcast or media channel with a listenership of under 10 000, but its programmes are so solidly biblical that all 10 000 are growing by leaps and bounds. You might have a radio station with a

listenership of half a million where the Word is so watered down that, as A.W. Tozer once put it, if it were medicine, it wouldn't heal anyone one, and if it were poison, it wouldn't kill anyone.

In fact, we need only look around us to see the truth of this. Church sizes are up, but there was never a time in church history when the church was having so little real influence on our culture. The church is laughed at, and rightly so, because it refuses to stand for anything. Never in 2000 years did Christianity have the reach it now has through radio, TV, the Internet and global missions. But that size just mesmerises the willingly ignorant.

The cold fact is that the world around us, particularly in the West, is getting worse and worse. Sin is on the increase. False teaching is abounding. Reverence for and belief in the Bible is being abandoned more and more. Basic Judeo-Christian ethics are eroding before our very eyes. Evil is truly abounding. In other words, the numbers never looked better, and the influence never looked worse.

And if the church does not wake up to the difference between numbers and influence, it will continue to deceive itself into being in love with its statistics, while its mandate to influence is all but ignored. It will review its attendance figures, its listenership, viewership and readership figures, and pat itself on the back, while all around us the situation grows darker and darker.

This is like an army which never goes out to battle, but continually takes inventory of how many soldiers it has, how much equipment, how many weapons – and then because it has grown, it celebrates that it's winning the battle!

For much of the church today, the thinking is: the further our reach, the greater our influence. They think, if we broadcast the Gospel by satellite to the ends of the earth, then our influence will be great. Here the size of geographical reach, measured in square kilometres, is considered equivalent to great influence. But being heard all over is not the same as influencing people all over. Certainly, the larger the reach, the larger your *potential* for a greater influence. But it is not a cause-and-effect situation.

Many Christians seem to think, 'If we're big, then the world will take us more seriously.' In a world where power lies in mass media and branding is all important, many are swayed into thinking that this is the way of Christ. Get global reach, get Christianity branded as very obvious and conspicuous choice, and we have influenced people. But merely speaking to large numbers is not the same as influencing them. The notion of size equalling influence stands in stark contrast to the attitude of Jesus toward numbers:

*Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

**Matthew 7:13-14**

According to Jesus, the crowds are a poor indicator of spiritual truth. The crowds are on the broad way to destruction. If few there be that find the way to everlasting life, our eyes should not be on how sizeable our congregations or listenership or viewership may be. This is not the influence that Jesus was interested in. He even echoes this in Luke:

*Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."*

**Luke 13:23-24**

*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.*

**John 2:23-25**

Here in John 2, Jesus was very popular, but He did not commit Himself to the crowds, or feel that great popularity equalled a strong spiritual influence. The reason is He knew what was in man. He knew that a large crowd following Him meant nothing more in some than following the latest fad. In fact, it all came to a head in John 6 where Jesus preached a very clear message on what it meant to follow Him.

*From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

**John 6:66-68**

Jesus did not believe that His influence was dimmed because the crowd had withered. Indeed, it was probably strengthened because now those who were with Him were truly with Him, with the exception of Judas, which He makes clear in the next verses.

And if you harmonise this teaching with His commands to take the Gospel everywhere, you see that Jesus did not equate influence with widespread popularity or large numbers. He wanted many to be influenced, but the number of those who would turn and come to Him was not the standard of success.

Furthermore, the numbers can be quite misleading. For example, a church may be growing because it is being obedient to the Lord and God is blessing it, or it could be growing because it is compromising the truth and catering for pagans. A church may be shrinking because God is disciplining it for disobedience, or it can be shrinking because it is becoming more obedient, and it is being purified. The bottom line is this: the numbers or the size counts very little when it comes to interpreting them as influence.

### **How do we measure influence?**

On one level, we need to ask, since when can spiritual influence be measured? There is the command to be an influence. There is the command to take the Gospel everywhere. There is the command to be salt and light. But where is the command to keep a running tally of statistics?

As Neil Postman puts it in his book, *Technopoly*: "Our psychologists, sociologists, and educators find it quite impossible to do their work without numbers. They believe that without numbers they cannot acquire or express authentic knowledge." Probably the same is true of the church. We feel if we cannot put our results into numbers, we cannot actually know what is going on. But what did Jesus say about the influence of the Spirit?

*Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

**John 3:5-8**

Hardly the thing a statistician wants to hear – that the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound but can't tell where it came from or where it goes! But such is the influence of the Spirit on the lives of people.

You see, much of the influence we will have we may never even know about. You may never know on this side of eternity how and who you have influenced toward or away from Christ. Indeed, our influence may continue long after our death. The Bible says of Abel, *"he being dead still speaks"* (**Hebrews 11:4**). And one of the greatest influences on my own life – A.W. Tozer – passed from this life in 1963. Influence simply cannot be measured in terms of numbers that reflect size.

In fact, I would say the church needs to move away from the often-idolatrous counting of heads like David's sinful census. Our goal must not be to measure our influence. It is simply to *be* that influence. When God pulls back the curtain and allows us to see some of what He is doing through us, that's wonderful. If not, that is His sovereign right as well. Here are three ways to align your focus on influence.

1. **Preach a clear Gospel:** It is one thing to take your message far and wide, and give it a large audience. It is another thing to get the message right. God does not bless diluted, perverted and man-centred Gospels. The Gospel is that the Holy Creator offers amnesty and reconciliation to His rebel creatures through the atonement of Jesus His Son. If men will lay down their arms – turn from their rebellion, and embrace Jesus Christ the Son of God as their forgiveness and righteousness – God will accept them in Christ and grant them eternal life. The Gospel needs to include the sinfulness of man. It needs to include the identity of Jesus Christ. It needs to include repentance. It needs to include faith.
2. **Live a distinctly holy life:** The influence of Christ would be far greater if those who claim Him as Lord lived under His Lordship. When their lives reflect the beauty of holiness, the distinct and beautiful difference that Christ makes, the influence would be all the greater. Instead of aping the world, when the church gladly takes its stand as separate, as different, as called out – God's influence will be clearly seen and known.
3. **Love God and your neighbour:** This is the sum of Scripture – worship God and edify your fellow man. God's influence has always been greatest in the men and women who were deep lovers of God. One thinks of people like Martin Luther, John Wesley, Isaac Watts, Jonathan Edwards, Amy Carmichael, George Whitefield, George Mueller, Charles Spurgeon. Their love for God fuelled their love for man, and the difference they made was tangible.

Influence is something that our modern obsession with statistics cannot capture. And for as long as we keep focussing on those numbers, we will be distracted from what Christ insisted we do – reveal Him to others. Be an influence. Preach and live the Gospel. And leave the result – be it acceptance or rejection – with Him. Be content with being an influence, and not with trying to quantify that influence. And do not idolise or focus on numbers.

In Part 3 of this series, we'll conclude by looking at the third error – believing that reflection equals relevance.