

Three critical errors in the modern church – Part 3

By David de Bruyn

In this series, we've been looking at what I believe are three critical errors the modern church is making. In Part 1 and 2, we explore the errors of believing that competence or respectability equates authority, and believing that size equals influence. Now we come to the third critical error, and in some ways, it is perhaps the most serious, because it affects not just the attitudes of the church, but the actions. I speak of the seldom questioned and almost universally accepted idea that reflection equals relevance.

What do I mean by that? The notion that if the church and its message is to be relevant to this culture, or to a particular generation, it must reflect that culture back to itself. The culture must come and hear its kind of language, its kind of music, its kind of issues. The church must reflect what is going on "in the real world" for the average man or woman to pay any attention to it whatsoever. You must mimic them, for them to take you seriously.

And if a church does not do that, it will be, and here is the terrible word everyone fears, 'irrelevant.' After all, no one wants to be irrelevant, right?

As we've seen in the previous two parts of this series, a failure to define our terms is what causes half the problems. When we do not know what authority is, or what influence is versus what competence is, and what reach or size is, we blur the categories between them and create confusion. Once we've done that, we've recreated ministry according to our own standards. So the first question we need to ask is this:

What is relevance?

When something is relevant, it is essentially applicable to something else. It is related and pertinent to something else. When there is relevance, there is also a certain amount of importance. Irrelevance therefore carries the idea of being unimportant and inapplicable. An irrelevant statement is one which in the context of a discussion cannot be rightly applied to any of the others. It has no true relationship to the others, and is essentially useless to the conversation.

So, bringing that over to this discussion, relevance is when the message of the Gospel is applicable to people's lives, it is related to them, and seen to be something of importance.

Relevance is when your message captures the attention of hearers, as they identify it as personally applicable to them. They see its tenets as part of their lives and so they stop to listen. Irrelevance would be when your message is seen to be something inapplicable to the lives of people, a message for someone else. They dismiss it and move on.

Now relevance is of course an important thing. Anyone who is actually trying to communicate with others is concerned with relevance. Unless you are satisfied to just get your words out regardless of whether your listeners sleep, tune out or even walk out the room, you are concerned with engaging your listeners. Your desire is that they would be interested in what you say, and give it a hearing.

This is a Biblical concern. Paul's desire was that people heard him and related to his message. So once again, many in the church have somewhat of an honourable motive. Just like in the Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we see that modern churches may desire that their message have authority, they desire that it influence those it reaches, and here again – the motive is right – they desire to capture the attention and gain the interest of the unsaved world.

But often, that's as far as the good part goes. Because with very few exceptions, the church seems to have bought wholesale into the idea that the way to be relevant, the way to capture and hold the attention of the unsaved world, is to package the Gospel in forms which this world recognises and enjoys. So, the thinking is – singing hymns in stain-glass windowed cathedrals, to quote the caricature, is irrelevant to the man in the street.

For the typical man, his life is one of working hard, playing hard. So, for example, you need to have a pop concert, where you jam harder and louder than the world does, only you do it for Jesus. This will supposedly make the unsaved coming say, 'Wow, I can really relate to Jesus! Jesus is cool! I'm interested in this kind of Jesus!' Or we open a Christian nightclub where we do everything the world does, short of a few things, and hopefully push people to Christ.

We could list a lot more examples, but really it is all around us. The pervasive thinking is is: the only way we will continue to attract unbelievers is by reflecting back to them something of their pop culture.

The first thing we need to say is this: truth is always relevant. You don't have to make the truth relevant. It is always relevant. Picture a pilot who realises the passenger plane he is piloting has developed a fatal problem and is going to crash. Now do you think that he is going to be thinking before he begins speaking on the intercom, "Now, how can I make this message about an imminent crash relevant to these people?" He doesn't have to make it relevant; it *is* relevant!

Truth about the Creator God who holds men and women accountable, who punishes sin but still loves sinners, who came to earth and died and rose again for the pardon and reconciliation of sinners so that upon death they might be with Him forever – this is relevant. Every man is going to die. Every man must face up to the questions of why am I here, and where am I going?

Now imagine that same scene, and this time the pilot comes on the intercom and announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have some terrible news. Both engines have failed, and we are headed for an inevitable crash into the ocean." Imagine some of the passengers getting annoyed with his announcement and saying 'Shhh! I'm watching the in-flight movie! You're interrupting it!' Or others who hear him and just ignore him, and go back to reading or sleeping.

Now, would you look at that scene and say, 'Well, the pilot should have used more relevant language. His presentation was boring. He didn't speak the language of the youth, or the corporate executive, or the working mother'? No, you would say – those people are insane, and out of touch with reality! For them to ignore a message about a coming crash from the pilot himself is not a problem of irrelevance, it is a problem of intelligence.

What we need to see is that this approximates what goes on today. The Gospel goes out – a life-altering message of reconciliation with the Creator Himself, and the insanity of sinful depravity makes people go on playing and working and acting like no such announcement has been made. Recognise that the unsaved person does not know what is good for them until God draws him. A corrupt mind has a completely different view of relevance. The Bible describes it this way:

Commented [AJ1]: Is 'intelligence' the best word for the analogy here? Maybe more like lack of understanding / care/ acceptance / belief? Many secular people are intelligent but not wise / believing?

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:14

So the important thing to understand is that the unsaved man has a fundamentally depraved mind. Like an insane person will not listen to you calling them out of a burning building, the depravity of man will not come to Christ and escape a burning hell. And what you need to understand is that no amount of appealing to what is familiar or popular is going to make the message of the Gospel seem intelligent and reasonable to him.

In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

2 Corinthians 4:4

Why then, is there the thinking that if we make the Christian life out to seem reasonable, fun, entertaining or cool, that people will accept Christ? How can you make the Gospel relevant to a man whose concept of what is relevant is skewed by his sin? He denies that things like eternity and God and heaven and hell are relevant. So must you then change the terms of the Gospel, and make as if it's about something else?

This is also the thinking behind the idea that if we get a prominent sportsperson or business executive or celebrity to come and tell us that they are a Christian, then it will make Christianity seem reasonable. After all, they are good at sports, and they endorse Jesus, so Jesus must be okay! This is sadly childish thinking.

The unsaved man who is not being drawn by God will not accept your presentation or regard anything you say about Christ to be relevant, regardless of what you do to dress it up. And **John 6:44** puts it, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.*" For you to draw such a man, you'd have to strip the truth of its essential nature until it is no longer truth itself.

They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1 John 4:5-6

Notice that the world hears you – the world gives you an ear, the world regards you as relevant – when you are *of* the world. When you are of one mind with the world, you speak their language, and they hear you. Conversely, when you are of God, your words are relevant to those who are of God. I hope you can see that what this goes back to is what you believe about the depravity of man.

If you think all men are fundamentally good and that, by appealing to what is familiar and fun, you can sway them to Jesus like a clever advert persuades you to use a particular product, then you deny what the Bible says about man. Before conversion there is a hardness that is not *ignorant* of the light, it is *indifferent* to the light. As Jesus said:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

John 3:19-20

Secondly, we need to understand that to appeal to an unsaved man's flesh to draw Him to Christ is not only contradictory, it is deceptive. And yet multitudes think this is the only way to be relevant. The thinking effectively goes like this: 'Men go to strip shows. But Jesus will save them from strip shows. So let us have a Christian strip show, where we can preach the Gospel to them as well.'

The example is crude, but the principle is exactly what is happening. It is bait and switch. Let us bait our hook with what appeals to the sinful nature – and then, when they are biting, slip the Gospel in. This will make it seem relevant. But this is contradictory. The Bible tells us so:

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.

Galatians 5:17

To use the flesh to get a man to the Spirit is trying to mix light with darkness. Not only so, but it is dishonest. It is a form of false advertising to use what we believe a man should repent of to draw Him to Christ, who will demand that they repent of that. That's like using a free drinks sign to attract people into an anti-drinking campaign!

Our goal is not to reflect the current desires of the unsaved back to them, it is to use the Word rightly, so as to allow the Spirit to create new desires.

And if you are going to try and appeal to a depraved by using what he thinks is relevant, you are actually doing something very damaging. You are confusing the very definition of repentance by including worldliness as a supposed draw card to Christ. The unsaved man will suffer for it by having a very fuzzy notion of what exactly salvation accomplishes when the church waves under his nose the very things Christ is supposed to save him from.

Furthermore, the church suffers because the things of the world are now baptised, as it were, into Christian service, and by virtue of being used by believers in ministry obtain a kind of 'safe' status. Believers will not shy away from worldly music that a famous evangelist uses. They will not shy away from films from which the preacher freely uses allusions for his sermons. In short, the church is not reaching the world. When this is the mentality, the world is reaching the church.

Here is what most people miss – when it comes to presenting a message of change – attracting people with more of the same is irrelevant. You do not change something by adding more of the same. Nor do you bring a promise of change by advertising it with a person's current lifestyle. Let me say, for a man drowning in the sea, showing him pictures of the ocean is not relevant. He wants something different. He wants something to pull him out the water.

And for a man drowning in his sin, nothing could be more irrelevant than a church which mimics his ways to try and impress him. What will be relevant, applicable or pertinent to him is something different. The unsaved man who is being drawn wants change, not a Christianised version of his present life. Could it not be that a difference is *more* relevant?

How sad it is to see the church afraid of being different. The word church, which means 'called out assembly' - being ashamed to be called out. The church abandoning a heritage which reflects a transcendent God, so as to

portray a pop God that everyone can access. And in so doing, the church has not made God relevant, it has made Him lightweight.

God, because of the church's attitude, is a pal, a chum, a friendly Santa Claus, a benign but slightly senile Creator, a constitutional monarch of the heavens, a nice figurehead. And the supreme irony is that in trying to make God relevant to this culture by stripping Him of His majesty and holiness, the church has made him irrelevant to a culture crying out for transcendence and beauty and majesty.

Reflection does not equal relevance. As said earlier, truth is always relevant. You do not need to make truth relevant. Truth is timeless. It requires no updating.

But there *is* something to be said for the presentation of timeless truth. For example, the way Paul spoke to Jews in the synagogue was different to how he addressed the Greeks on Mars Hill. With one, he could make his approach using their knowledge of the Old Testament and their expectation of a Messiah. With the Greeks, he began with a discourse on God the Creator. Paul knew that he had to adapt his presentation to his audience. Paul states his philosophy in 1 Corinthians, verses which have become the anthem for the pragmatic church:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22

Many take this passage to mean that Paul imitated the culture and customs of those he evangelised. Of course, this is not true. This passage comes at the end of a long discourse where Paul is explaining that he is willing to surrender his rights and prerogatives for the sake of those he ministers to. He will not offend Jew, Gentile or weak believers by doing things he could lawfully do, but which may cause them to stumble. He teaches that Christian liberty is the freedom to not partake of some things, to forgo certain rights, for the sake of others.

That might upset a lot of people's pet theology, but that is simply the verse in its context. It does not mean that Paul adopted the morals, traditions, actions, music, dress and general behaviour of those he ministered to. The mind begins to boggle when we take this idea of imitation to its extreme – must Christians become nudists to win nudists to Christ? Must we imitate the Devil to win Satanists? Must we get tattooed all over to win bikers to the Lord?

The fact is, this notion of imitation and reflection is a recent innovation. The Gospel call has always been one of separation and proclamation, not infiltration and assimilation.

What is the church to do?

Certainly we are to apply the truth in a way which approximates the life of those we speak to. Jesus taught eternal truths but spoke in parables about farmers and grapes and sowing and fishing and stewards and landowners. He used the situations of His day to teach timeless truth. We're to do the same: apply the truth in a contemporary, modern way. But here is the key, crucial difference. The Lord Jesus did nothing in His presentation of the truth that would distract from or take away from what He was teaching.

In other words, His delivery did not contradict or confuse His message. His message was relevant to His audience both because it was eternal truth, which is always relevant, and because it was wisely couched in the images and metaphors of his day. That's what we are to do. But when we go beyond applying the truth in a way our modern audience can understand, and the format in which we deliver it distracts from the message in a vain attempt to appear relevant to our audience, we are doing the very opposite.

The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan once said, 'The medium is the message.' However, many Christians have not grasped this notion. They still think that the medium is neutral, that the format is neutral, and that the message is somehow immune to the effects of the delivery vehicle. They think Christians can use any and every presentation technique under the sun, many of which blatantly contradict the nature of God and the message they are trying to preach.

So, in my opinion, these three errors are part of the reason the church finds itself in the state it does. In all three errors, what the church desires is not wrong, if it wants it for God's glory. It seeks authority for the message; it seeks influence among those who hear it; and it seeks that the message be regarded as relevant, and therefore capture attention. But sadly, this pragmatic age has got the better of many in the church, and things which are not the same are paired up.

Competence is seen as authority. Size is seen as influence. Imitation or reflection is seen as relevance. And so instead of pursuing the spiritual qualities of God-given authority, God-given influence, and God-inspired relevance, the church is chasing respectability, numbers and an imitation of the world. And this must seem quite pathetic to the onlooking world.

The truth is, if we are to recover our authority, influence and relevance, we must – as the Lord often tells us in the Word – begin in the heart. We must begin in our individual and corporate relationship with Him. Revivals, and the consequent authority and influence and relevance they bring, come as a result of repentance, prayer, seeking Him and humility.

There is nothing wrong with excellence. There is nothing wrong with large numbers. But if these things become our goals, they are idols, substitutes for what only God can give. And without repentance, the church will increasingly drift into a post-Christian evangelicalism. May we as individuals and as churches steer away from that with heartfelt repentance.