

Relevancy Talk

What kind of world are we living in? Have you ever asked yourself that question. What about this question: why would someone want to come to church? These are questions that have vexed me for years. My feeling is that while Jesus is relevant, the worldwide church often misses what God has for us and can even make the gospel message irrelevant, deliberately or accidentally.

We'll have an overview of some of the things going on in the world and then practical responses to relevantly make Jesus known in these days.

1 Corinthians 6.1-3: As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way..

Paul was aware that today is the day of salvation and of God's favour – every day God's saving power and grace is available and at work. He urged the Corinthian church - like the Western Church with great bits but messy and surrounded by a Pagan culture – to not receive God's grace in vain but to use it and not put any stumbling block in anyone's path to God's work.

This is the starting point – we have God's power, God's saving power is at work. We must do what it takes to spread the good news, but be careful not to do anything to hinder God's work. **We need eyes to see what is happening in the world and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us**

What is going on? Well, good is becoming evil and evil is becoming good. Satan takes what God does and inverts it. God sent Jesus to save the world. Satan's message to this world is that it is him, not God who has come to save humanity. He offered Jesus the chance to bow at his feet, but Jesus would not. He is offering the same choice to the world today, and to the church. Like Jesus, we must know and use the Word as our weapon and refuse. In this new liberation theology, God is an oppressor, stopping people doing what they want and Satan has set himself up as the liberator. The Biblical narrative is no longer the big story that guides society.

Our mission as the church, according to some of the prophets is to increase our ministry in 3 areas: 1. Spiritual warfare. 2. The supernatural and miracles. 3. Compassion, mercy and grace. The world sees the church as unnecessary, a relic, a bit twee at best – but as a judgemental spoiler of their fun. We must speak the truth that Jesus and his truth bring freedom, that the world's way brings imprisonment. God's placed boundaries for our freedom but like Garden of Eden, man is trying to break free to destruction.

Paul – Acts 17 Athens and Acts 22 Jews

The world is changing. Schools change every 3/4 years, but the church is more like a large oil tanker, taking time to change and respond. So how can we respond and where do we look to find answers. The Bible of course!!

In music, a chorus is often called a 'hook.' When people are fishing and catch a fish they usually do so with a 'hook.' Not to 'snare' people but because you really love them with God's love. **Story: young people at event asked the leaders, "will you still care about me if I don't commit to follow Jesus?" People are asking the same question.** We need to go on a journey with people. On the Road to Emmaus, Jesus travelled on a journey until the time was right and he was revealed to them. The same is true for us & people

Have you ever wondered how to relate to people maybe some people are hard to reach - wonder how to connect? Paul did too. In Acts 17 we see a great example of relating well to the people around you. Paul visited Athens. In verse 16, Paul saw that the city was full of idols. 'Aha!' he thought, 'here's the hook into bringing these people Jesus'. So from verse 23 we see his technique. He started off by saying 'I see this is a very religious city.. I even see you have an altar to an unknown god.. so let me tell you about this god who is in fact the true God, the true way..' We also live in a world with people seeking something, but they're looking to the wrong thing.

Yes, it brought him a bunch of trouble - but he connected using ideology, examples, terms the people could relate to. And he used it well. People around us have their 'unknown gods'. It's our part to introduce them to God.

In Acts 22 we see Paul preaching in Jerusalem. So a new device, a new technique, a new 'hook' was needed. So, much as I relate my testimony to people who are into bad things (God brought me through and re-envisioned me with a true purpose), so Paul related his past as a Jew and how Jesus met with him on the Damascus Road and transformed his life. Paul used the names, the places and recounted the events in detail.

He once again caused a load of trouble for himself - but Paul was fulfilling part of the prophecy made in Matthew 11.12, which says:

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

Are you seeing the Kingdom forcefully advancing? The first step is to line up your thinking with the word of God. Let that be your inspiration and guide, not how you feel, how you think or what the world says. We trust in so many things but not the Almighty God. Today say to God, I trust you and want you to use me.

Paul – did all things to all men for the sake of the gospel, 2 Corinthians 9.19-24. Here's verse 22:

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

So did Paul become a prostitute to win the prostitutes - or a drug addict to reach the drug addicts? No of course not. But he related to people in their way and their level. If someone was weak, he spoke to them gently and kindly. If people were under the law, he talked to them in 'law type' terms, using the Old Testament as a way in.

The key is that Paul did what was necessary (within the Biblical framework) to reach people for Jesus - and so must we. We must relate to as many people as possible. This means deconstructing barriers put up in churches to keep people out and start welcoming people in. This means setting aside things traditional, religious and revered that are a hindrance to people meeting Jesus.

If Paul deliberately kept himself in chains to spread the Gospel then he accorded the Gospel a higher priority than his own preferences or life. Surely there are non-essential aspects of your church life that need to be thrown out. What are there in your church life or lives that are a hindrance?

STORY - Told by my last youth pastor who went into church one day with a homeless guy. The sermon (as all too often) was fairly boring and the homeless guy went to sleep. The church service then moved through to communion and the bread was passed around. When it reached the homeless guy, he woke up, said 'thanks very much' and ate all the bread - much to the horror of the church gathered. The wine went the other way round the room.

The Vine – John 15.5

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

I'd like you to think of a vine. It has many branches. Each branch has different lengths and thicknesses. Each branch has a different amount of other branches and grapes coming off it. The branches are all pointing in different directions, at different angles.

This is the kind of church God has called us to be. Each branch is a unique connecting point for people around us to see and know Jesus – and reaching into different lives, situations and people.

Your branch may be education, it may be children, it may be health, it may be business, it may be music, it may be looking after your family. But each branch needs 2 things, just like a grapevine.. First, you must be connected to the source of nutrients – Jesus (the vine). This is what happens when we become a Christian. Second, let Jesus remain in you. This is our part, proactively seeking God, obeying him, listening to his voice. Pursue God with purpose, passion, integrity and excellence.

2. Jesus – woman at the well and relating to women, John 4.

Jesus knew how to reach this lady. He crossed over every social boundary - talked to a woman, a non-Jewish woman, a woman who'd had various partners - and asked her to get a drink of water for him! It'd be like wandering up to the prostitutes in your local hood and asking them to come for a coffee and meal, saying you'll pay, no questions asked, no dodginess, just to minister to them. Imagine the problems you could have. Imagine the things Jesus could have been accused of.

Jesus chatted with the woman gently and connected, his way in to talk was to ask for a drink. Jesus saw something in this woman. Sometimes God will prompt you to go talk to someone, do something, give someone money. I don't know. But be sensitive because relating to people means being aware to the Holy Spirit's leading. Jesus happily and easily used the 'supernatural' and we should be open to God using us to do the same.

Jesus asked for a drink from the well, and then turned this to say, 'if only you knew the free gift of God.. of living water.' This approach intrigued the woman and she asked Jesus for more. We can learn from this. What can you do, say and live that will intrigue people?!

There was something in the nature of Jesus that attracted this woman to him and his message. This is a lesson for us to be right with God and be comfortable with ourselves. The woman at the well opened up to Jesus and allowed Jesus to say things to her that others may have taken very badly. She was searching for truth and for meaning and had some spiritual awareness ('I can see that you are a prophet..' v19). Look for these people, they are searching for something.

Jesus had the answer, presented it beautifully and transformed a woman's damaged life. Let's have more of this, Jesus working through us. Let me also say that this woman was used powerfully by God. Her testimony / preaching led to many people coming to faith. John 4.39, "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Ladies, your story can become a testimony to God's kindness in your life. Don't ever let anyone tell you that women can't speak in church or anywhere else!!

3. David – served purpose of God in his generation – Acts 13

As we've looked at elsewhere on this site, David is recorded as having his priorities straight. He served God, he fulfilled the purpose for his life and he did it in the way that fitted and related to his generation. To serve God in your generation, you must step up and do what God calls you to do, and to understand your generation so you can be used reaching them.

You can serve God but be irrelevant. You can serve God but miss your life's purpose. You can relate to your generation and miss God's call. You can relate but not serve God. All have some validity. But it is only when we put all 3 factors together like David did (despite his failings - despite our failings) that we can truly be said to have done the God walk well.

Paul & Barnabas – set apart for work to Gentiles in Acts 13

Have you felt really called by God to do something to a specific group of people - a specific age - gender - race - culture? I have. God has called me to work with young people - to work within hip-hop culture - and in other specific ways like media, video. These things are very valid.

Let's go to Acts 13. Out of a specific period of worship and fasting came the calling of the Holy Spirit to set apart Paul and Barnabas to do a specific work - to reach the Gentiles. Up until this point, the apostles had reached only Jews. The people worshipping continued to worship and fast until the end of the period - and then laid hands on the guys and sent them.

The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul to do a special work for which I have chosen them.'

First, these guys were set apart. Second they were specifically named. Third they were to do a special work. Fourth, this work had been chosen for them to do by God.

Acts 2.4-6: All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

Some ministry in the church will be general - say for example being a pastor of a 'regular' church. But some ministries are very specific. We see evidence of God according equal value here of 2 kinds of ministries - the general and the specific. If we look at the body of apostles, preachers, teachers, we'll see that the majority were and are called to the general ministry. But there are those called to specific targeted work. So your call may be to prostitutes, to prayer for Israel, to Muslims, to the hip-hop generation. It's all good!

We also see the start of God calling his people to reach out in a new way – by reaching the Gentiles - a people that hadn't been actively reached up until now. So this was the start of the 'outside - in' model of ministry, bringing people in to God's Kingdom by going out, finding them, talking to them in their language and terms, and bringing Jesus.

Peter tried to stop Jesus in his ministry by telling him that he wouldn't let Jesus suffer and then be killed, Jesus said 'get behind me satan.' (Matthew 16.23) Peter was standing in the way of Jesus' mission, purpose (to save humanity by dying on the cross, to give people the chance to turn to him). If people try to stand in the way of your divinely (God-given) appointed ministry, then you have the right to say to them, 'get behind me, get out of my way.' You see, it's possible for us as Christians to be in the way of the work of the evil one, even unwittingly. Don't stand in the way of God's work through to others.

Remember, Paul did preach and reach out to the Gentiles, but he also reached the Jews (as we've seen in Acts 22). Don't be so wrapped up in your call that you miss other opportunities to spread the message.

Jesus choosing disciples – Luke 5, fishermen so one of reasons why Jesus said 'fish 4 men'

In Luke 5, Jesus is recorded as choosing some of his disciples. When he did, he spoke to them simply, directly and in terms they understand. Yes, there was special significance in saying to the guys, 'Come and be fishers of men' but as ever with Jesus, his words were well chosen. He said to 2 fishermen, 'come be fishers of men.' He didn't say, 'Yey verily unto thee oh gentlemen of the extrication of the Gadus morhua invertebrate.' No, because that would have been more effective to a scholar of learning. And because it wouldn't have made sense.

Basically, Jesus showed people a new way to do the same thing they'd been doing. The disciples had been fishing. Now it was time to use those skills and also do the same spiritually as well as physically. Sometimes, God uses you to open up new doors for people.

BUT REMEMBER

1 Corinthians 13 – love is key, loving God, loving others. We don't have to be totally relevant. There is a ministry of a 60 year-old male on the streets on a US city who just hangs out, cares for and loves young people - and they love him. He has no money, isn't a young person, doesn't know the latest fashions or trends - but he loves God, loves young people and brings Jesus to them through his actions, words and life.

Don't get so hung up on relevancy that you forget that God is all-powerful, uses all people in all kinds of ways. Just as you don't have to be cool and funky to be a youth worker, so you don't always have to be something to reach that group. It may help, it may hinder. But God's love in you, God's love through you, can break even the hardest heart.

Yes, we need to take a stand politically and in life. We need to pray for more people like Daniel, Joseph, Mordecai to be raised up in government too. But, 1 Corinthians 13.1 says: If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

The church has for too long been like a gong or clanging cymbal – doing things without love and grating on people's ears who don't yet know God. But we are encouraged to pursue a new way – the way of love.

This must come through our relationship with and love for God. Out of the abundance of the heart a man speaks. As a man thinks, so he is. Let your heart be filled with Christ and his love – this will impact what you say and do.

It's Valentines Day soon. Let me quote JFK from 1961: ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.

Ask not what God and others can do for you, ask what you can do for God and others. This is the path to relevancy. Let's pray..