



When Relevance Trumps Reverence

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The Peace and Love Hippie Hostel is one of Paris' most budget-friendly, a dingy sanctuary for under-showered backpackers. It was there that I met Derrick. Derrick didn't believe in organized religion. Derrick didn't believe in unorganized religion. Derrick believed in marijuana, and that marijuana alone gave life meaning. One factor that drove Derrick to find meaning in chemicals rather than Christ was, quite frankly, Christ's people—the church.

In Derrick's own words, "whatever the world can do, Christians can do 10 years later and worse." He went on to cite Christian music, movies, literature and church trends that struck him as derivative, contrived and inauthentic. The big irony is that many of these Christian endeavors were aimed precisely at being relevant to guys like Derrick. The harder the church tried to be relevant, the more irrelevant she became.

Behind this irony lies a question that is both good and dangerous. It is what we may call the "Relevance Question": What would it look like for us, as believers, to be relevant to unbelievers? We don't want the Derricks of the world to see us as a quirky tribe of xenophobes. So in answering the Relevance Question we usually come up with a projection of what we think those unbelievers out there are like. Once we think we've got a good grip on the tastes and preferences of our unbelieving target demographic, we reinvent how we do Christianity so that what we're selling coincides with what they're buying. As perceived demand shapes what we supply, innovative church models begin to emerge. We make Jesus relevant again.

Or do we?

Not according to Derrick and the many like him. With the Relevance Question as the first step in our journey, our final destination is irrelevance. When relevance is our first priority we end up powered not by the Spirit of Christ, but the spirit of the age.

There is a more fundamental question we must face squarely together. Before asking what relevance looks like to this or that culture (or subculture), we must first ask "Who is the Jesus we exist to reverently worship and reflect with our lives?" Let's call this the "Reverence Question."

When we put the Relevance Question ahead of the Reverence Question, a few things happen:

1. We alienate anyone who doesn't fit the bill. If we start with a drive to be relevant to postmoderns, then we become instantly irrelevant to anyone who still puts faith in science, values logical propositions or holds out hope for objective truth. If we assume that post-modernism is in the Oval Office of ideas in Western culture (and that's debatable), there are still protesters in the streets who voted for the other guy. Don't they need the gospel too?

2. We play a never-ending game of follow the leader. Like every other "ism" created by human minds, postmodernism's days are numbered. Eventually we will realize that our postmodern church is yesterday's news and we will dream up a post-postmodern church. In this train of thought, the church has made herself the caboose, always trailing distantly behind the engine of culture. Shouldn't Jesus be our engine, and his word the tracks we follow into the future?

3. We present a torn portrait of Jesus to the world. Postmoderns, so we are told, value the image over the word, mystery over certainty, questions over answers, the relational over the rational. The relevance-driven church follows suit. Yet Christ is simultaneously relational and rational. He used words and images, mysteries and certainties, questions and answers. Shouldn't we be displaying a wider spectrum of Jesus' radiance to the watching world?

4. We lose sight of the chief end of everything. The chief end not only of man, but of everything, is to glorify God. Driven by the conviction that "the aim and final end of all music is none other than the glory of God," Johann Sebastian Bach created some of the most beautiful music ever composed. What if the primary factor determining where Bach's dots fell on the score sheet had merely been making something that people would like? Do you think his music would have been as powerful? Me neither. There is a profound difference between art motivated by adoration for God and that motivated by the approval of people.

In sum: Live a life of authentic reverence for Jesus and you become relevant to the watching world. Live your life to become relevant and you become both irreverent to Jesus and irrelevant to the watching world. Before we ruminate on how to reach seekers, we must focus on how to revere the Great Seeker, the God who seeks worshippers who worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). You exist “to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:12b, 14b), “so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you” (2 Thessalonians 1:12a), that your life and mine would shout together Paul’s anthem “to him be glory forever” (Romans 11:36b)!

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