

Jesus in the Non-Christian Marketplace

Most of my Christian friends spend between fifty and sixty hours every week among non-Christians, in their respective marketplaces. Conversely, the amount of time they engage with Christians in church settings is negligible. So, guess where their relationship with God and the reality, relevance and durability of their beliefs is going to be more visible (or ought to be) and tested.

Jesus the only Christian in His marketplace

What if we are the only Christians in our marketplace? The good news is that we are not the first. Jesus operated all his life in a non-Christian environment. Every day, he witnessed racism, gender bias, religious intolerance, economic inequality, abuse of human rights, injustice, corruption and immoral behaviour. He had no Christian friends and no supportive home group. Think about it: how *did* Jesus cope? How did He maintain faith and make godly decisions among non-Christians? He shone. He became a dynamic force and enlivened His world.

It didn't help the Jewish authorities opposed Him. When Jesus talked about God He was challenged by the religious authorities who thought they were always right because they alone had been delegated to speak for Jehovah. They thought that only they were authorized to forgive people, so they were flabbergasted when Jesus did so (Luke 5:17-26; 7:49). They believed they held the key to God's presence; when Jesus said that God was His Father and related to Him outside of the context of the temple and synagogues, they were threatened; they accused him of blasphemy and decided to kill him. Ordinary people were scandalized when he associated with drunks, crooks and prostitutes (Luke 7:34). He didn't fast when everyone else did so (Luke 5:33-35). He taught that tithing, fasting, even praying, for their own sake, were a waste of time and effort. Nationalistic Jews thought he was voicing the unthinkable when he told them to follow the examples of their Samaritan arch-enemies.

Christianity in the marketplace did not have an auspicious beginning, in the eyes of those who misunderstood the mission of the Messiah. Jesus' approach to living out Christian values among non-Christian friends went against the grain. He touched dead bodies, went out among lepers, defied taboos when speaking to women and took religion out of the sanctuary and into the town squares and alleyways. He got down among the sick, the poor, the dispossessed and those who were broken, lonely and downtrodden. For those who make distinctions between clergy and "laity", Jesus was the ultimate "lay person". When people wanted to see Jesus, they usually didn't go to church to do so. Non-Jews (Gentiles) would never have entered the temple (they were forbidden by Roman law from doing so, on pain of death) or a synagogue, looking for Him (cf Luke 6:17). They were more likely to find him at home; in the workshop; hanging out with his friends; in a public square; or down beside the lake. Jesus went to towns and regions where no self-respecting or security-conscious religious leader would ever be seen. The authorities were heard to mutter that He was spending

too much of His time with the wrong kind of people (Luke 19:7). He didn't shun them.

Re-shaping conventions

How did this situation come about? Jesus was born into a strict Jewish community and in many ways He was a man of His time. However he broke through all the boundaries and turned convention on its head.

Why was Jesus different? For a start, he had a completely different way of looking at social and moral issues. His life and teaching went against many long-established practices. He usually didn't use theological language. He said that those who were persecuted were blessed in God's eyes (Matthew 5:1-12). They should, He insisted, turn the other cheek when slapped; they should forgive their enemies (Luke 6:29). He understood shrewd business practices and referred to them affirmatively in his illustrations (eg Luke 16:1-9). He knew the marketplace was competitive. He taught it was possible to be pious on the outside and be committing adultery or murder in the heart (Matthew 5:21-27). He disregarded centuries of tradition when he overturned the tables of money changers in the temple, because the leaders had commercialized religion, and when He suggested the walls of the temple would be cast down (Matthew 26:61). He called people names, like "snake", "tomb" and "hypocrite" (Matthew 23:33; Luke 11:44; 12:56). He publicly called powerful King Herod a "fox" (Luke 13:31-32). Not your average religious leader. So much for mild mannered silent witness.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus went further than the Founding Father Moses in His teaching. He claimed that the Patriarch Abraham and all the prophets pointed to him (John 8:58; John 5:39; Luke 24:44-47). Addressing power struggles between some of His followers, Jesus said that they should get over one-upmanship and learn to make a practice of serving one another (Matthew 20:20-26). He called on the rich to give away their wealth and follow Him (Luke 18:18-27). He challenged those who loved life to lay it down for His sake. He invited those with vested interests to follow him into poverty (Mark 8:35). He expected those who put family obligations, houses and land (personal financial security) ahead of him to be prepared to give them up (Mark 10:29, 30). He demanded that those who cared about reputation adopt His example and empty themselves for Him (Philippians 2:5). He called on those proud of their positions and human achievements to humble themselves. Those who proclaimed human rights were called to die on the cross with Him (Mark 16:24). Jesus told Jews and Samaritans who argued about where to worship that their traditions were no longer critical in God's great scheme of things (John 4:19-26).

Such was the first Christian in the marketplace. Jesus was radical, he was revolutionary and he was on a fatal collision course with powerful human forces. Importantly, however, common people didn't think of him as so outlandishly different. When He was popular they took to the streets in support of Him (Matthew 21:8-12). Everyone who met Jesus had to make a choice.

Jesus did not hold back being God's witness because of possible reactions from his peers, unfair decisions on the part of those in authority, deliberate

misrepresentation by His detractors, people with poor moral standards, or the possibility of betrayal. He told us to expect betrayal (Matthew 24:10-13).

Being distinctive today

Life today is more sophisticated than in that first century, but people are basically the same. The question is: can we adopt Jesus' approaches and make them our own? He saw people as "sheep without shepherds" and loved them (Mark 6:34). Alternatively, can we miss the point and be like the Pharisees, the religious leaders of His day, and insist on a legalistic, compliance-based religion ("touch not, taste not, handle not", cf Colossians 2:20-23), where language, dress and church attendance count more than living faith that informs a whole way of life.

It is sometimes difficult, in Western society, to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian values, between good and evil, what is acceptable and what is not when we come to forks in the road. Moral absolutes are discounted by many as "dated". The edges are continually blurred and vital differences are explained away. Look who's leading the charge. Usually not God's people. It is easy, in church life, to live by the world's values, in terms of money, power, influence, politics, competition for the "market share" and moral standards. , Some of our best models are "the most natural thing in the world", precisely because they are coming from psychology, marketing and management gurus. This should cause alarm bells to ring, because if there is no differentiation between Christian faith and the rest of society, we are only one step from abolishing (as obsolete) or marginalizing one or the other. If that is allowed to happen, godliness will become a specimen in formaldehyde, conveniently classified and labeled in case we forget what we are observing.

The media often take a stand against Christian values being "imposed" on society but are hushed when non-Christian value systems are imposed instead. Hypocritical? Sure, but look who drives them. Assimilation means forgetting all about our differences or identities. What this usually means is abandoning important distinctives, areas where we are different. "Let's all be the same".

Parents counsel their teenage children to, "get ready for the big world out there". It is assumed life outside the home is a trap that has the capacity to lure the unsuspecting, inject deadly poison, suck them dry and spit them out as desiccated messes, like flies in spiders' webs. It is true, as the Prodigal Son found out to his cost, that the standards and values of the world are permissive and parlous, but living on the edge of this precipice also enables us to test and validate what we believe and the power of Christ within us.

Jesus didn't avoid the marketplace, "just in case" he was sexually tempted, became frustrated, got into a fight, got caught up in a corrupt money scheme, or broke one of the more than 600 laws prescribed by the religious lawyers. He was God, but He was also man; He was tempted like the rest of us (he just didn't sin, cf Hebrew 4:15). He taught that the world is filled with people loved by God. He got to know their problems. If most of them are not naturally inclined to step into our church sanctuaries (why should they?) the best way for them to be reached is

for those who inhabit polished sanctuaries to step outside the comfort zones into the arena and establish meaningful connections.

Before we start strategizing to influence others, we need to know about ourselves. What are our boundaries, the borders of our lifestyles, the standards we pursue when we are alone? We need to carry out spiritual inventories in terms of our own lives and become people of character, depending on the power, guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit; who heed His voice in the situations and decisions that confront us, and engage our marketplace with a rigorous commitment to Biblical values. We need to know what it is we believe, and why. If we are properly skilled in the things of God, we will be able to reach into our hearts and bring them out as necessary (Matthew 13:52). Our spirituality, focus, integrity, morality, accountability, transparency, service and humility, that I have talked about elsewhere, will reflect the strength of Christ's character in our lives.

Identifying non-Christian values around us

I believe the greatest non-Christian values in the marketplace today (as in Jesus' generation) are godless greed, secular humanism, moral relativism, dishonesty, lies, revenge and a lack of absolutes. These lead to pessimism, despair, anomie, selfishness, and a dangerous vacuum of belief. Let's briefly look at some of these anti-values and try to address them from Jesus' lifestyle.

Godless greed

"Greed is good" is usually the mantra of the marketplace. It is assumed that, without greed, we go bankrupt; when profits collapse, people loses job and we all suffer. In a very real sense, the mathematics make this appealing logic. However, I have learned that, when greed alone is the dominant creed people aren't guaranteed the "good life"; many lose out, the weak are exploited; families break up; and the local community is divided into those who have and those who do not. The Bible teaches that covetousness is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Jesus warned about the "deceitfulness" of riches (Matthew 13:32). Paul called wealth "uncertain" (1 Timothy 6:17). Greed can become a religion. Jesus explained that we can be rich in possessions, but poor toward God (Luke 12:15-21). He expected his disciples (even those with homes and responsibilities) to count the cost of following Him. He spent many nights without a roof over His head (Matthew 8:20). The central issue isn't luxury or homelessness, but understanding that we are either the masters of our possessions, or we are their slaves. Jesus taught that we need to make a life choice between the lordship of God and that of money (Matthew 6:24). His value was esteeming possessions, talents, life itself, as gifts from God, for which we are accountable to him.

Secular Humanism

Secular human starts with the belief that there is no god but man. Atheism is a creed that has an almost religious faith that God does not exist. Take God out of the picture and we have to invent gods. Ask any anthropologist. In the absence

of the Creator, the most logical god is man. Satan tempted our first parents with the promise that they would be like God (Genesis 3:5). Secular humanism is the religious worldview of agnostics, so-called freethinkers, rationalists and skeptics.

When men and women replace God with images that look like them there is no longer a need to think about higher powers. We lose ultimate “purpose”. We revise all the rules. The Bible says that those who trust in God are blessed, but those who trust in human strength and abandon God are cursed (Jeremiah 17:5, 7). Strong words! Jesus lived in a very religious time, but there were people in His day who lived without God. Jesus said, “Have faith in God (Mark 11:22). He emphasized obedience and acknowledging God’s presence over against tenuous human achievements. The Greeks were humanists, even though they had a panoply of deities. Jesus said we should seek God and His kingdom ahead of all other human pursuits (Matthew 6:33). If we want to avoid being sucked into the vortex of humanistic values, we need to learn strategies that put God first.

Dishonesty

If there is no God and everything is relative, why should we be honest? If truth is variable, there is no such thing as honesty. Cheating is OK. We talk about “social expectations”, but without an ultimate lawgiver, legislation makes no sense. Anything goes. Framing laws can’t shape or change underlying attitudes. Without God we go around the jungle making up our own sets of behaviour, doing what we like, until people who have other expectations try to stop us. We talk about honest politicians and then reject this as oxymoronic.

When leaders are governed by opinion polls, what’s left is usually cynicism. People in Jesus’ day were no less honest than our neighbours today. They lived in tough times and justified their lives by the need to survive. Jesus didn’t get involved in the dishonesty of craven deals and cover-ups. He taught that God looks into our hearts, all the time. He knows what lies at the bottom on the pit. He calls us to repent, to have a change of heart, turn around and speak the truth in love, regardless of the cost.

Lies

Arnold Schwarzenegger’s 1994 movie (Director James Cameron) about an action oriented super-spy named Harry Tasker fighting Middle Eastern terrorists when his wife thinks he is a boring computer salesman who is not spending enough time at home was labeled “True Lies”. “Truth” and “lies” were juxtaposed in the title, providing a “nice balance”, according to reviewers. The ancient Greeks called this “sophistry”, trying to make misleading or fallacious arguments sound plausible in the hope of deceiving people or getting around their objections. If there is no “Truth”, lies are to be expected. The people of Jesus’ day taught that truth was relative. Hundreds of years later, Mohammed and his scribes wrote in the Koran that there are occasions when it is permitted to deceive people.

“True lies” are pervasive in every one of our marketplaces today. Pontius Pilate asked the perennial question at Jesus’ trial, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Jesus

said that He was “The Truth” (John 14:6). Anything less than Christ, anything more than Christ, is not established in Truth.

The results and the alternatives

Beliefs have consequences. Values are beliefs in which people have emotional investments. If society is valueless and we trust nothing we are left with the vacuum of nihilism. Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger wrote about the subject of nihilism, using it to trash Christianity. The problem with this religion is that it leaves us without any ultimate purpose or meaning.

Without values, family, justice, reconciliation, equality, human rights and the sanctity of life can be jettisoned without a second thought. We are left with a world in which cannibalism, incest, infanticide, euthanasia and vengeance (“Don’t get mad; get even”) are all permissible, if you work through the logic carefully. Just wait until enough people accept that such practices are justified. Tellingly, these were all values that were practiced in Jesus’ day. People had no guidance.

God’s word says that, if we love the world and its value system the Father’s love does not dwell in us (1 John 2:15). When the pursuit of position, power, passions or possessions without Christ become predominant in our thinking it is only a small step from “civilization” to the primordial soup and a sense of anomie. Anomie is a sociological word. It was given prominence of Emile Durkheim in 1893. It is a state where norms (expectations about behaviours) are confused, unclear, or are simply not present. When we experience anomie we find it difficult to articulate who we are and how our roles and relationships with the rest of society and the physical world around us work. Life no longer has a higher, meaningful function. Social bonds are dissolved. Despair and emptiness ensue. Alienation, crime and suicide are to be expected, as people “pack it all in”.

Whether we are parents, school or university students, or in the workplace, the only thing that we will keep us from embracing the values of the world around us is to embrace the power of the Holy Spirit and follow Jesus’ approach.

People without values are like sailing boats without anchors and rudders. They are driven this way and that by every wind. The Bible warns us to pursue Christian maturity, so that we will not go the same way. We are to “grow up in Christ” (mature as Christians), so that we will,

“... no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14 NIV)

Jesus came to deliver us from anomie and lead us back to relationship with Father God. He taught us that God has a plan for our lives. We need to establish convictions, so that we do not lose connectedness with God and reality along the way. That does not mean being doctrinaire for the sake of it, but leading through the example of being surrendered to the Lordship of Christ.

Imagine Jesus strolling through His marketplace? Or involved in yours. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever. The same power and love that gave Him the capacity to survive as the first Christian in a non-Christian world are yours.