

A Call to Relevance

The first Christians had a reputation for changing society. Their enemies accused them of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). The followers of Jesus Christ revolutionized the way men and women thought about God and life’s priorities, how they treated one another and how they interpreted what was going on around them. The message they preached offered (and delivered) change and hope. Within a few years of its launch the church began to confront and contribute to the collapse of an empire and a panoply of entrenched deities and ancient faith systems. The followers of Jesus, initially dismissed as irrelevant and disparaging called “Christians” by detractors in Antioch (one of the largest cities in its day), came to be considered unavoidable, relevant and compelling. In no time at all, despite vicious and vigorous attempts from the highest levels to stamp them out, they came to shake the political, philosophical and social foundations of their world.

It is still the purpose of God for His people to be imbued by the Holy Spirit and revolutionize humanity, at home, at school and in the workplace. Let’s put aside the clichés and stereotypes and see what this means in practical terms.

Jesus a “down-to-earth” God

The UN World Heritage-listed Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres (built 1194-1220), west of Paris, is arguably the most beautiful church building in the world. I have spent hours admiring its Gothic beauty. During the Middle Ages, when relatively few people could read or write, one of the vehicles used by the church for teaching stories were stained glass windows. Cathedrals and lesser churches across Europe came to be filled with windows graphically depicting scenes from the Old Testament, the Gospels, church history and major events of the times. Popular ideas about God, Jesus, judgment, Heaven, Hell, the Apostles, heroes of the church and its contemporary hierarchy often came from these sources.

Unfortunately, the vision a lot of people still have of Jesus is fixed in stained glass windows or images in churches. This Jesus, who is artificial and untouchable, does not communicate to people living in the Third Millennium.

What is your image of Jesus? The writer to the Hebrews saw him in the following terms: “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” You could say that he was truly “down-to-earth” (literally Ephesians 4:8-10).

If Jesus were living among us today, as a man, what would he look like? Born into the family of a peasant craftsman in an insignificant town in a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire known for its heat, religious extremists and political instability, he didn’t start life with great prospects. He was known to the neighbours as the “son of Joseph and Mary”, the boy next door. As he grew up, he probably played all the games other children played. No doubt he had his “favourite” fruits and vegetables. He used the bathroom several times a day, just like everyone else. He had body odor. As a young man his closest friends smelt like dead fish. His feet got dirty from tramping through the countryside. In other words, his life was pretty ordinary.

When Jesus launched his ministry, he often slept out in the open (Matthew 8:20). He associated with homeless and dysfunctional people. The religious professionals people called him a “sinner, because he didn’t fit their mould. However, the common people thought he was closer to God and to them than any of the establishment figures. The Jesus of the Bible was not like the well-groomed Jesus of most movies. He was much more mundane, more banal in appearance. Yet in his life, death and resurrection he reconciled God and man, opening up the way for us to live in God’s presence forever.

Jesus’ first disciples were, for the most part, uneducated labourers or petty bureaucrats whose importance was dismissed as soon as they reached towns of any importance. When they wanted to get close to him, he simply invited them home, where they got to know Him better (John 1:39).

Jesus was God. But he was also man. When he came down to earth he accepted the same limitations as everyone else. The Bible says he got tired, became weary of crowds, wept at the death of a friend, was frustrated by other peoples’ bad attitudes, experienced hunger, thirst and loneliness and balked at the prospect of death. He was tempted just like us. Think about it. He knew what it was to have to follow orders from his parents. He had feelings. He experienced being a teenage boy surrounded by pretty girls. He had good reason to feel hatred for the Romans. But in all this he did not sin (1 Peter 2:22). His followers were ordinary people. People listened to him because they knew he understood and identified with them. His message was relevant to their daily lives. His teaching was replete with simple earthly stories drawn from daily life, that had heavenly meanings.

Is Jesus’ church relevant today?

Down through the centuries, Jesus has not changed (Hebrews 13:8). But society and “church” have changed considerably. What does the church look like to an outsider today? Not long ago, I asked this question of a young person at the conclusion of a Sunday service. He replied that good churches have contemporary music, up-to-date furnishings and high quality audio-visual facilities. But that response confused “church” with buildings. His description equally fits most modern convention centres or secular training facilities. It says nothing about the relevance of the church to the human condition. Is that all church is? A facility. Tiles, glass and technology? Sometimes I have walked past elaborate church buildings with trendy names and wondered what on earth would tempt me to join, if I were not a Christian. Usually, the answer has been “not much”. (What about your church?) Surely there is more!

God loved us so much that he didn’t expect us to find the way back to Him. He came to us instead. Theologians call that the “incarnation”, God taking on human flesh, being born as a child, the Creator taking the form of a created being. Jesus’ name is “Immanuel”, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Jesus connected with people in the street because he responded to peoples’ felt needs and provided answers that were relevant to daily life. The majority of His followers continue to be ordinary people (1 Corinthians 1:26-29); the message is just as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago.

Relevant Christianity is still characterized by God's love in action, building bridges, reaching down and out to others with credibility. The Bible says that the Christian community grows and builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16). Stagnant churches talk about love but outsiders recognize if it is in short supply. The relevant church will demonstrate God's character and make disciples of Christ who recognize and are motivated by divine love. This type of church will reach non-Christians and unchurched believers. God's love within will go beyond verbal expressions and operate like a powerful magnet.

Relevant to all people and cultures?

In my neighbourhood I can walk past Hindu temples during the festival of Deepavali and peer in at the priests and worshippers. What does Jesus mean to them? Just another deity, to be added to the existing menu? Have they ever heard the Good News that God is One and that He loves them, in terms they can understand? Down the road, Muslims celebrating Ramadan tell me their ideas about Jesus; they believe they have the authentic version of the story. Do they know Jesus is alive, whereas Mohammed is dead?

If the Gospel is to have relevance, it must be understood by friends from different religions, cultures, age groups, socio-economic conditions, languages and personal journeys. This does not come about by changing the message to accommodate it to individual comfort zones, but by expressing it in such a way that it can be grasped and believed, if their hearts are open.

Christianity is perceived by its critics as having lost touch with reality. It is seen as abstract and theoretical. Could they be right? Christians have cultures that make one cringe. We must recognize this and not obfuscate the message by interring it in tradition. Look at the religious paraphernalia that has grown up around Jesus' name: bookmarks made of olive wood - "the sort that Jesus used"; a bottle of "Holy Water" from the Jordan River, "where Jesus was baptised" (it has a cute picture of the Holy Spirit descending from heaven, on the side of the box); seraphs that glow in the dark and play "Holy, Holy, Holy", as long as the batteries are working; "herbs from the Holy Land - like those Mary would have used in her cooking"; "Biblical scents" exuding "the smells that greeted Jesus in the Garden"; Dead Sea bath salts "to give you a heavenly lift"; cups with inspirational sayings; Lily of the Valley and Rose of Sharon soap; tea bags with Bible verses on the labels, "for that special moment"; Bible verse candy canes; and "faith" jelly beans. Christian kitsch abounds. On my travels around the Middle East I came across an endless array of products marketing the region's associations with Jesus. But what in heaven's name do they have to do with life back home, in the suburbs, where we face the daily grind and have to make the difficult decisions of life?

Cultures change. Witness the ubiquity of Coca Cola in the so-called Third World, as well as more "developed" countries. On a journey through the Peruvian Andes I once visited a village where people had no electricity, no running water, no windows on their houses, but a huge "Beba Coca Cola" sign on the wall of a mud hut. When I first visited Belgrade after the Balkans War (sanctions were still in place) the first thing I noticed in the city centre was the McDonalds outlet. It is hard to envisage a world without take-away food, DVDs, microwaves, i-pods and digital cameras. When European explorers travelled through Africa their ability to write down words was regarded as

“magic”. It is now possible to sit in a grass hut in the centre of the continent and access the Internet using solar powered satellite telephones. Cultures do change, even though the Gospel does not; we need to keep ahead of the game and present the message effectively to the new human context.

Language can also be a stumbling block? People do not grasp the Gospel if the terms we use and the concepts we present are alien to them. The assumptions they have about the nature of truth, God, sin and sacrifice are different from statements contained in Christian creeds or liturgies. It is possible for the unchurched to be so focused on the architecture and iconography of the church that they completely miss the personality of Jesus?

The message we declare is authenticated when we live reality, lives that are unequivocal, clear, meaningful, contemporary and attractive. Not just rhetoric. Not legalism, for the sake of conformity. I have found that in churches and Christians where legalism predominates spiritual passion is usually below average. (Duty and passion are mutually exclusive.) Being relevant means living God’s way, because it is truth and because it “works”. Jesus was relevant in his day because he was infused with the power of God. His followers were passionately and contagiously enthusiastic about Him because they had a genuine relationship with Him and knew he truly cared for them.

People give up on organized religion

When people give up on church, they don’t give up on spirituality. Instead, they shop around for alternatives to sterile religion. Their boredom thresholds are low. They walk away from tradition and shallow spirituality because tradition alone, though hallowed by its adherents, simply doesn’t work beyond the placebo level if rigor mortis has set in. They are better educated, more clued-up than any previous generation, but they are also more alone. They feel their elders are out of touch and have nothing in common with them. They are more prepared than ever to jettison irrelevant and effete values.

Life is not black and white, but many shades of grey. Modern men and women reject extremism, but often end up standing for nothing at all. They reject the voices of the past and one-size-fits-all religious dogmatism. Busy people want going to church to be fun and value-added, not an activity that flows from a sense of “duty” to God, to do a “favour” to the pastor (portrayed as “faithfulness”). They don’t want church life to be reduced to meaningless repetition. If we wish to address rapid turnover in church attendance we need to look at our praxis and see what works in pluralistic, reductionist, syncretistic societies where all bets are off and social taboos are no longer sacrosanct.

People today are increasingly mobile, physically and mentally. They have gone from book to screen and their world has shrunk. As a consequence, many of the old models, jargon and ceremonies no longer work. Young people are prepared to experiment with other religions. They have more information available to them than any other generation in history. They are interactive and multi-channel. They sit in front of screens and anonymously chat with virtual communities across the globe. They absorb a wide range of attitudes, symbols, music, languages and sounds. If we are to reach them, the narrative has to be diverse, high-tech, relational and culturally relevant, without changing the central message. We need to engage effectively and imaginatively and get closer in practice to the heart of Jesus’ message.

Many modern young people feel their leaders fail to articulate clear directions, that politics and business lack moral fibre. They have a culture of “no-values”. This is the environment in which Christians can make a difference.

If we are to reach others with the Gospel we need to be able to distil what they are experiencing, what they need, what’s important to them and what excites them. We need the Holy Spirit’s help to do this – otherwise we won’t last the distance. Transforming disjointed lives is not a matter of intellectualizing the meaning of truth, it is allowing the power of *the* Truth, through the person of Jesus, to change their opinions, revolutionize their hearts and heal their fractures. When men and woman have this type of encounter and birth an authentic and intimate relationship with God, the Christianity they embrace will be one worth living for, worth dying for, worth passing onto their communities and children, in the face of the most strident opposition or indifference.

We must make a difference

There is a growing trend for Christian formation outside of traditional church structures. People want church life that is not boring, monotonous, unpleasant, materialistic or non-directional; worship services that are as attractive for young people as for their parents, because they stem from “life”. Men and women respond to preaching and counselling that make sense and work; prayer that comes from the heart, not rote (every denomination and single-issue church or home group has its own rote); worship that excites and focuses joy on God, not just the moment; programs that promote Jesus, not leaders; hope that does not fade; relationship with a God who is objectively “there”, where they are; who speaks to them, in their own language. They need grace that forgives, transforms and reconciles people; spiritual life that transcends the material, but meets needs; love that builds families and provides a bedrock for marriage and family; and meaningful Biblical absolutes that (by definition) don’t change, but apply to each and any cultural setting.

Relevant Christianity is led by empowering leadership. Churches today are full of people who have God’s call on their lives but will never be equipped and released to realize their potential because of religious protectionism. Effective and mature Christian ministry concentrates on equipping and empowering men and women for God’s service (as Jesus did). Healthy church life talks less about “laity” (not a New Testament concept), looks less like pyramids and more like a nurturing environment, where Christians have the “fire” of God in their bellies, the love of Jesus in their hearts and are encouraged to allow the Holy Spirit to make them what God wants them to be. Christianity focuses on Jesus, not man; it reflects God’s energy and purpose and is unashamedly Christo-centric (Romans 1:16). Only the power of God can transform people. Fulfilled lives answer the existential questions and make the Gospel relevant.

We always think that ours is *the* authentic model and that it will break all the records. However, in an era of accelerating change, we need to know what is real, what we need to hold onto, what is negotiable, what is peripheral, what is truly distinctive about church life, worship, leadership and discipleship. If we are inflexible we will snap under the pressures of modern living, even though the Gospel per se will remain God’s transforming truth for our society.

Biblical Christianity reflects the conviction that God is in charge and that the Holy Spirit has come to empower us to be Jesus' witnesses. With His help, ordinary Christians can accomplish extraordinary results. Church life that is motivated by Him will stand the test of time and experience sustained growth. Church organizations need structure and form. Charisma without character and relationship leads to chaos. However, men and women without servant hearts, who have roles in the church, often feel threatened and abuse spiritual power. However, the complex forms and rules that may once have been useful lose functionality over time. Relevant Christianity is characterized by a preparedness to identify and change what no longer works. It doesn't deem structures unspiritual, but at the same time it does not mistake structures for the essence of Christianity. Relevant Christianity is prepared to identify and jettison false paradigms. It focuses more on an encounter and relationship with the living God than harmony with denominational structures or the tensions between joyous exaltation and quiet reverence as styles of worship. Style takes second place to substance and God's presence.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting we allow ourselves to be seduced by pressures to conform culturally. What we need at base is spiritual renewal.

We can be optimistic or pessimistic about change. According to Reverend Peter Corney, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions. What shape will a reinvented church have? What ideas will predominate? What model are we trying to achieve? How much of the past should be carried forward? How can we evangelize modern cities? What is the future of the church as we know it? What is the future role of the current parachurch organisations? What new organizations will be needed for the new day? Corney is right in raising these matters. However, the fundamental questions are: will we change? do we have what it takes? are we prepared to take risks? or are we going to continue to gauge spirituality by levels of church attendance?

Authentic Christian community brings others into God's kingdom. The denominational franchise model (in which all churches look alike) does not need to constrict us. There is no single God-ordained model, despite what some parochialisms suggest. Practices that worked well fifty (or even twenty) years ago may not do so any longer; some are timeless and will work in practically any generation and culture. We need to examine our lives and cultures and seek God's wisdom (James 1:5 – I often apply this principle to my secular work) for the best ways to take the message and the person of Jesus into our daily lives in such a way that others will be attracted to Him.

Being relevant does not mean re-inventing the message, but re-discovering it. A journalist once asked Billy Graham if he thought his method of preaching would put back the cause of Christianity fifty years. At the time, the world was in the grip of the Cold War. People were looking for answers. Science, once considered the antidote, was now known to be capable of destroying the human race through pollution and nuclear weapons. Young people were demonstrating against foreign wars. People everywhere were looking for answers. A new liberalism was sweeping the Christian world; some church leaders suggested modernism, with its shift away from absolutes, would provide a panacea. The last thing universalists wanted was a narrow evangelical conservatism. Graham's answer was unequivocal. What he wanted was not to put back the cause of Christianity fifty years, but two

thousand years. Back to Jesus Christ. Only by becoming radical (from the Latin meaning “root”) and getting back to basics will Christians find the essence of the message, the Man, the Son of God, with his dynamic power and compassion to transform human lives, in a way that is completely relevant to the new Century. That is our challenge as we go forward.