

providing a future with hope

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BECOMING RELEVANT

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

So many churches these days worry about being relevant. We should. We must relate to the culture around us in appropriate ways. Things are not like they used to be. Gospel quartets and flannel boards don't cut it like they once did.

But our concern for relevance is oftentimes misdirected. We want our song services to be up-to-date, so we discard the hymnal for contemporary praise and worship. Out with "Blessed Assurance" and "The Old Rugged Cross" and in with "Blessed Be Your Name" and "How Great is Our God."

In preaching, we offer "talks" (not sermons) that focus upon subjects like self-esteem, child rearing, and conflict management. These talks are delivered through power point and the latest video clips. I have to admit, I've seen some pretty cool productions.

Sanctuaries of high ceilings and stained glass with stationary pulpits have been scrapped in favor of multi-purpose centers with portable just-about-everything. Of course, suits and ties and other formal wear have long been closeted and replaced with polo shirts and khaki pants. We call this being relevant.

Wrong.

Relevance has little to do with music or architecture or clothing. Don't get me wrong, some of these

changes have been much needed, but this is not what it means to be relevant.

At the very outset of His public ministry, Jesus defined the gospel and, in so doing, defined relevancy. Reading from the book of Isaiah, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to

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proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19).

We tend to overspiritualize passages like this. We interpret the *poor* to mean those who are spiritually bankrupt and the *blind* and *oppressed* to mean those who are lost and in sin. I'm not suggesting that this

view is wrong; it is just incomplete. A good rule of biblical interpretation is: Start with the literal meaning and build from there.

Jesus unquestionably stood in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and, as such, addressed the social, economic, and political injustices of His day. His words and deeds show a disdain for ruling systems that are corrupt and oppressive and favor a select few. Whether it involved turning over the

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tables of the temple money-changers or talking one-on-one with a Samaritan woman, Jesus constantly challenged the status quo. His purpose was clear—to bring freedom and deliverance to the poor, the fatherless, the alien, . . . the disenfranchised. This is *who* the gospel is for, and this is *what* the gospel is all about.

The early Church understood the revolutionary (and relevant) message of Jesus. They allowed no needy person to live among them. Instead, they sold their goods and gave to each as he had need (Acts 2:44-45). The matter of food distribution with regard to widows was so important that the first deacon board was selected for this very reason (Acts 6:1ff.). In whatever ways possible, these believers sought to extend fairness and equality to those less fortunate.

Now ask yourself: What would it mean if we as the church took seriously (more than just in the November elections) such things as health care for the poor, education for the children of our inner cities, stewardship of the earth’s resources, human rights,

world hunger, and war and peace? I would suggest that it might mean that we become relevant which might mean that the world will start taking us seriously.

I know there are pockets of holy conspirators (i.e., Christians) scattered around the world who have been gripped by the glory of the gospel and are involved in enacting legislation to assist the needy. Others volunteer their time to inner city missions and programs. Some are involved in community clean-ups. Others contribute to worthy organizations. Some have even adopted children from underdeveloped countries. Thank God for these expressions of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

But the church by-and-large is silent on these matters. We relegate these issues to the government and contend that the church’s responsibility pertains principally to matters of the eternal. In so doing, we limit the gospel and neuter it of its beauty and power. The gospel is for both later AND now.

It was a vision of God’s kingdom-gospel that drove people like John Wesley, William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, and Charles Finney in their crusade for the abolition of slave trade, the reform of values, and the prevention of the exploitation of children and workers in mines and prisons.

Our hope today lies in rediscovering the timely and timeless socially encompassing themes of the gospel. Such a rediscovery will undoubtedly lead to relevancy and just maybe revival.

Testimony

Richard Anderson

“I never knew what it was to have a two-parent family. My mother and father divorced when I was a year old. My sister and I lived with my mother until I graduated from high school.

My mother was always searching for something to fulfill her spiritually. She embraced whatever the reli-

gious craze was at the time. We were exposed to Transcendental Meditation and various Indian and Buddhist philosophies.

I did have some friends, however, who invited me to a Bible-believing church. I was happy there and felt like I belonged. This was my first exposure to Jesus and Christianity.

When I turned 15 I began experimenting with drugs and alcohol. I found acceptance with an older crowd that was heavy into the party scene. This launched me into a twenty-year cycle of sin and chaos.

I drifted from one bad relationship to another trying to find something that would fill the emptiness in me. When a relationship failed I would turn to alcohol, and when that didn't work I would find another relationship.

Despite my alcohol use I was able to keep a steady job. The money I made I spent trying to stay high all of the time.

In 1990 I got married and had a beautiful daughter, but I continued seeing other women which led to my divorce. I tried several treatment centers but as soon as I was released I wound up right back where I started.

My family eventually gave up on me. I ended up alone and depressed and wanting to die. I became homeless and broken-down physically, mentally and spiritually. I felt God hated me and that I was doomed to a life of addiction and misery.

I had heard about Life Challenge through a church service I attended. On September 29, 2002 I entered the program. That was the day my life truly began.

I attended the daily Bible classes and went to church. I learned that God loved me even though I was a sinner. I also learned that Jesus Christ died to

cleanse me of my sins. I accepted Christ as my Savior and completed the program one year later.

I did well for a year or so. I had fellowship with Christians and went to church. I was working at a Christian Conference Center in California.

But I began slowly to compromise, and once again fell back into my old lifestyle. After a year I was fired. In despair I cried out to the Lord and He heard me. I opened my heart to Him and was sorry for the sins I had committed. I once again surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and asked for His forgiveness. In His mercy He reached out to me.

I now work as a Port Authority police officer in San Diego, California. I am married to a wonderful Christian woman. I'm part of a great church. I am blessed.

The time I spent at Life Challenge was the greatest gift God gave me other than His love and forgiveness. It was there that the great work of His salvation started and I became a child of God."



MINISTRY NEED

We are updating our main center dining hall and need \$4,500 to purchase 75 high quality banquet chairs. We need an additional \$10,000 for 13 restaurant grade tables. These will be used not only for meal times but for morning class.

Thank you for partnering with us as we seek to advance God's kingdom.

For the glory of His name,

Jeff