

Is The Church Relevant?

Introduction. Attendance in many places is shrinking, not growing. Even committed Christians are attending less often. But it's not all gloom and doom. You can always find the opportunity in every obstacle. And yet, I know it's easy to get discouraged about the future of the church. While the world seems to be falling apart, so does the church.

A Barna Group survey asked, "What, if anything, helps Americans grow in their faith?" The responses comprised a variety of answers including prayer, Bible reading, and family and friends. Interestingly, the church did not even crack the top 10. In fact, the survey showed that people are divided on the "importance of attending church."

Millennials (those under 30), the survey showed, "stand out as least likely to value church attendance; only two in 10 believe it is important." Almost sixty percent of Millennials who grew up attending church have left. Overall church membership and attendance have decreased among all age groups in the past 20 years. Over one-third said they don't attend because the church isn't relevant to them anymore. Unfortunately, the way that man has dumbed down worship makes it feel incredibly irrelevant to most people now.

But the Lord's church is not going to disappear. God will see to that. And there are characteristics that will be true of all American churches that grow in the future. The more closely we align with these principles, the more likely we'll reach more people. We're going to investigate what God wants for the church in the book of Ephesians and five opportunities the church has to really grow in our culture.

I. God's Vision For The Church

- A. The church cannot be irrelevant (Ephesians 1:3-2:10).
 1. Why? Because God purposed, planned, and predestined the church. It was in His mind before He created the world. The church is the body of Christ with Jesus as its head.
 2. Eight times in this text, Paul speaks of being "in Christ." When we are "in Christ" we enjoy all spiritual blessings including redemption, forgiveness, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and become heirs of an eternal inheritance. Such a divinely designed church cannot be irrelevant.
- B. The church is where community is experienced (Ephesians 2:11-3:13).
 1. God created us in Christ for community or togetherness. We were fashioned for divine association. We were formed for fellowship in His family. Following the gospel was never intended to be a solo act.
 2. Paul speaks of Christians being together seven times. He says we're one and united in Christ. We're called fellow citizens (2:19) and fellow heirs (3:6).
 3. Paul Tournier wrote, "There are two things one cannot do alone: Be married and be a Christian." Such a relationship cannot be unimportant.
- C. God cannot be missing from the church (Ephesians 3:8-21; 4:11-12, 22-24).
 1. Paul wrote that "through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might be known." In it Christ is glorified, gifts are discovered, and equipping occurs to prepare us for mutual edification and spiritual service.

2. Spiritual maturity is realized as we become a new person in Christ and this is what produces growth. Such a mission and ministry cannot be meaningless.
- D. The church is where doubts are answered (Ephesians 4:14-16).
 1. When fears arise and doubts descend, like a tempest-tossed vessel on the ocean, we can find stability, receive assurance, and reestablish our faith.
 2. This helps us to find help and hope when the truth is spoken in love. Such a noble endeavor cannot be inconsequential.
- E. The church is where God is both learned and experienced (Ephesians 1:1-6:24).
 1. The entire epistle to the Ephesians affirms that we've received God's revelation. Since the church is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), its teachers, preachers, and pastors preach the gospel, enlighten unbelievers, edify the saints, encourage the weak, and help all who would open their hearts understand God's word.
 2. This allows them to experience His love, accept His grace, receive His mercy, and know the surety of their salvation. How can such an experience be uneventful?

II. What Can The Church Do?

- A. Fill the relational void.
 1. Thanks to an abundance of technology, we have never been more connected as a culture before, and we've never felt more disconnected.
 2. As our lives have moved online, and as people have become more mobile and location-independent, people have never felt more lonely.
 - a) Our social media feeds give us the illusion of community. But read between the lines and you'll see intense loneliness and even the re-emergence of tribalism where we only (virtually) associate with the people who agree with us.
 - b) I'm guessing that if you talk to people in the community and around the world who are working through life issues, and ask them, "Who are you talking to about this?" The number one answer? Nobody. People may have friends, but few have deep friendships that can carry the weight of life and faith and hope and meaning and existence.
 3. The church can do better with community. We claim to be friendly, but that usually only means we're friendly to each other. And catching up on what happened this week and talking about sports or the weather is hardly what Jesus had in mind when He told us to love one another (John 15:12, 17).
 4. Relationship is a real mission of the church. It defines the vertical nature of our faith (loving the Lord) and the horizontal essence of the gospel (loving your neighbor) in Matthew 22:37-40.
 5. If anyone can get relationship right, it should be the church. Ask yourself what you're doing to forge the deepest relationships you can forge in this life? Nobody should be able to out-community the local church.
- B. Broker meaning.
 1. In the same way that our lives are awash in thousands of half-real relationships thanks to our devices, we are also drowning in a sea of information.

- a) Never in the history of humanity has so much useful and useless information been available to so many so quickly. And we have no idea what to do with it.
 - b) The current and future crisis is not a crisis of information; it's a crisis of meaning and purpose.
2. You've felt this every time you've scrolled through your social media feed and thought, "There is nothing of value here at all." In fact, on some days, the constant rants, drivel, trivial observations, bragging, self-promotion, and complaining has made you want to give up social media altogether.
 3. The challenge moving forward is not to produce more content. The challenge is to provide meaning in the sea of endless content. This provides a huge opportunity for congregations. Who better to provide people starved for meaning than the ones called to share the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8) and to present all men perfect in Christ (Colossians 1:28)?
- C. Embrace selflessness.
1. Narcissism is a rapidly growing problem in our culture. You feel the pull to make your life all about you. And I feel the pull as well.
 2. The gospel offers a powerful counterweight to selfishness; it calls us to die to ourselves (Colossians 2:20; 3:3; 2 Timothy 2:11). When you die to yourself, something greater rises.
 3. A life defined by generosity and service to others (especially those in need) is increasingly attractive to a world suffocating on itself. Said another way, a life devoted to the kingdom of God stands out in a world devoted to the kingdom of self.
 4. The church is just as guilty as the culture when it comes to narcissism. We can get obsessed with ourselves as easily as anyone. But the opportunity to live generous lives of service to Christ and to others is a tremendous opportunity. The New Testament paints beautiful portraits of people who served Christ and others (Luke 7:37; 8:2-3; 21:2-4; Acts 16:15).
 5. The more Christians sacrifice their own wants and needs for the sake of the kingdom, the stronger the church will be.
- D. Deal hope.
1. You know what's missing in the cultural dialogue these days? Hope. We do a great job focusing on the problem and pointing out shortcomings and sins. But we could do better pointing toward a preferred future.
 2. We've read to the end of the story, and we know how this ends. Love wins, faith wins, and hope wins (1 Corinthians 13:13). Hope isn't a pie-in-the-sky that floats above reality. It's as gritty as the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of the dead.
 3. Which means our message and lives need to get into the grit of addictions, conflict, brokenness, and the fragility of life and fight for hope. Someone said that you need to kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.
 4. Hope that's divorced from reality isn't hope at all. But hope that goes into the darkest places and cracks open a thin wedge of light that eventually floods the room is exactly what we need (Romans 5:2, 4; 8:24; 12:12). So deal hope — because it's what our hope-starved world craves.

E. Make your mission the mission.

1. Where does this leave you and me? It leaves us tearing away the parts that don't work and replacing them with an authenticity and power that do.
2. This is true whether your church is 50 or 500. It's true whether it's growing, flat, or declining. Radical change outside the church demands radical change inside the church. This isn't the 1950s and 60s any longer.
3. Just because you shouldn't change the message or the mission doesn't mean you shouldn't change the methods. If you don't change, irrelevance is a hairbreadth away. Sadly, an unwillingness to change is what's fueling the decline and stagnation of 90% of churches.
4. For churches that are willing to have the tough conversations and undergo a radical transformation to make sure that everyone is committed to excellence, the future of the church is secured. The mission belongs to Christ, not to us (Matthew 20:28; Luke 19:10). And Christ has more invested in the future of His church than all of us put together. If you make your mission the mission, you will always have a future as a church.

Conclusion. In the first part of the lesson, you may have thought, "I've been to churches that are not like you've described." Maybe so. But the Ephesian letter is portraying God's vision for all local churches. If we're falling short of these divine imperatives, then let's refocus. Let every church leader and local congregation recapture God's vision and concentrate on the five characteristics that will allow churches to grow in the future. By doing so, God will "receive the glory in the church by Christ Jesus." And then we can become all He created us to be.

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