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**The Church's Challenge to Stay Relevant**

By Freddy Davis

Here is the beginning of an article written by NPR (National Public Radio) national correspondent John Burnett about how he sees problems in the modern church. (You can read the entire article at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/10/1141010320/as-attendance-dips-churches-change-to-stay-relevant-for-a-new-wave-of-worshipper>)

*KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — It's Sunday morning and a small group sits around a fire pit in a community garden under the limbs of an expansive box elder tree. Church is about to start. And it's cold.*

*"God our Father, we are just so thankful for this time that we have to share this morning," says Pastor Chris Battle, a big man with a pipe clenched in his generous smile. "And we really thank you for fire that keeps us warm even as we sit up under this tree. We just pray that you would bless our time together."*

*Three years ago, Battle walked away from more than three decades leading Black Baptist churches and turned his attention to Battlefield Farm & Gardens in Knoxville. They grow vegetables and sell them at a farmer's market. They also collect unsold produce from around the city and deliver it to people in public housing once a week.*

*Battle says he left because traditional church was not connecting with people. He felt they were turned off by the sermons, the pitches for money, the Sunday-morning formality of it all. The only true relevance the church has is how it deals with people's personal relationship with God. "So I said to myself, maybe we need to begin to do church*

*differently. But what does that look like? And I didn't know until I got to the garden."*

The article goes on to describe efforts by other churches and church leaders to experiment with ways to make the church "more relevant" to modern society. Burnett goes on to share about a Methodist church that has opened a coffee shop to give people a place to just come, relax, and talk if they want. He also shares about an Episcopal church that is offering "breathing under the stained glass" where people sit on yoga mats on the terra cotta floor in the stately, hushed sanctuary that is softly illuminated by candles under the stained-glass saints. They do this as a means of helping people have a spiritual experience without having to attend Sunday morning services.

Honestly, rather than making the church more relevant, these "experiments with new ways to offer meaning to people's lives" is doing exactly the opposite. These churches are not sharing a Christian message at all. They are attempting to create some kind of social activity or environment that will entice people to connect with their group rather than pointing people to Christ.

The above are examples of things some anti-traditionalist churches are doing in an effort to become "more relevant" (some rather off the wall). But the effort to become more relevant is not limited to these very unorthodox methods. There are even many traditionally structured churches that are straying from the real work of the church as they attempt to attract new people. Too many are focused almost entirely on style as they turn their worship services into theatrical productions, and pastors turn their sermons into "feel

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good" messages with a focus on personal development. Of course, there is nothing wrong with using various methods to make people feel more comfortable. But when the very purpose of the church shifts to using gimmicks in order to "draw people in," rather than truly building the kingdom of God, the "church" has ceased to be what Christ came to build.

To get straight to the bottom line, what we are talking about here relates to what the church conceives of as its purpose.

- When the purpose of an organization that calls itself a church is purely to grow the organization and help attendees get some kind of social or personal benefit, salvation turns into things like: interacting with and providing social benefits for the community, creating an enjoyable worship service, helping people advance in their personal development, providing fellowship opportunities purely to create community, and providing a "spiritual environment" to help people get "spiritual feelings." With this as its primary purpose, a church's various activities become their very definition of salvation.
- When the purpose of a church is to build God's kingdom, salvation involves sharing Christ and living in a relationship with God in the context of one's spiritual family. Here, many of the activities listed above might even be present, but they are expressions of salvation, not its end.

The church will never be relevant that is focused on "this worldly" things. In that case, it becomes nothing more than just another social service organization. Of course, there is nothing wrong with social service organizations, but they are

not the church and can never fulfill the purpose of the church.

So where has this temporal definition of a church's "relevance" come from? In a nutshell, it emerges when a church uses naturalistic worldview presuppositions to define itself. Naturalism is the belief that the natural universe, operating by natural laws, is all that exists. That is, there is no God or any kind of transcendent reality.

To be sure, if you were to ask people in these churches if they believe God does not exist, many of them would be horrified at that thought. The truth is, many of the people who attend churches that have redefined their purpose are not even aware that it has happened. What has occurred is that they have changed the authority source for defining what their faith is all about.

The authority source for Christianity is the Bible. It is understood to be a revelation from God Himself, and it is the principles and values taught in the Bible that determine the purpose of the church. The authority source for a naturalistic worldview comes from human reason. Since Naturalists don't believe in the existence of God, all they have left is to use their own reasoning to determine what they deem to be important in life.

What has happened in many churches is that they have maintained the structure and activities that they have always had, but have changed the authority source they use to determine their theology and values. With that, the basis for their values and operating principles come from human reason rather than the Bible. And the reason most people don't realize this has been done is because the leaders who are teaching them are able to cherry pick Bible verses out of context and present them as true using a non-biblical belief structure.

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People who are not trained in detecting this will probably not even realize it is happening. They hear their leaders reading from the Bible and just assume that they are interpreting it correctly. As an example, they hold out the ideal that "God is love," yet ignore that God is also righteous and just. In this way, they are able to preach a non-biblical version of God's love without most people even realizing what has happened. After all, God is love, right?

We see this playing out, for instance, in churches that are all in on advocating for homosexual marriage, transgender "rights," abortion, illegal immigration, and other social justice causes. They push the notion that since God is a god of love, He would never deny homosexuals the right to love who they please, or would never allow a person who feels they should be a different gender to have those feelings if it did not reflect reality. We also see it playing out in churches that promote a "feel good" gospel or a "name it and claim it" theology. The theology of all these false beliefs begins with a false premise, so they end up with false conclusions.

## The Church's Relevance

The church is not a social organization. It certainly does present and operate in society as a physical organization, and a faithful church will do things to materially help its members and the community. In that sense there is

a social element. But its social elements are expressions of its purpose, not the purpose itself. People's deepest needs are not material, they are spiritual.

The church's relevance in modern society is not derived from how it pleases people in society. Its reason for existing is not to make people feel accepted by the church community (though that will happen when the actual purpose of the church is being fulfilled). Rather, it is to share with people how they can be accepted into God's family.

As such, people who engage the church should not feel that they can hold non-biblical beliefs and have those beliefs be unconditionally accepted by the Christian community. Non-believers should, of course, be received unconditionally as persons

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made in the image of God and loved by Him. But their sin cannot be accepted as normal. Relevance does not derive from people's personal opinions, expressions of compassion, or personal preferences. Humanity doesn't get to decide which beliefs and values are relevant and which are not. God has revealed that in Scripture.

No, the church's relevance does not come from doing things that cause society to shower accolades on it. Rather, it comes from pointing people to the truth revealed by God so they can escape the bondage of sin and know a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Any church not doing that, rather than making itself relevant, is totally irrelevant when it comes to eternal things.