

Church Relevance

I want to tell you a story that I was just made aware of. It is about the painting entitled, “The Church of Auvers” by Vincent van Gogh. Most know that van Gogh was the insane artist who committed suicide, at the age of 37. What most people don’t know is that he was the son and the grandson of two renowned Dutch Reformed preachers. Early in life, he felt a calling in his own life to preach, and was ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church. His first assignment was as a missionary to the coal miners in Belgium, perhaps the poorest people in all of Europe.

He went to that assignment, well-educated, dressed well, and had a nice parsonage to move into. He had never in his entire life been around such poverty! He got so overwhelmed that he sold all of his possessions except one change of clothes. He distributed the money among those impoverished people, then moved out of his parsonage and lived in a hovel just like the miners. Needless to say, he was well-received, being a unique pastor among those people. There was no modern communication and the only way to find out how the young missionary was doing was to send down a couple of superintendents. When they found him living like that, they were shocked. To them this was a disgrace to the ministry, and as a result of the way he was living among those miners, they shamed him, they said that he was a disgrace to the ministry, and he was fired in his first church.

That humiliation that was hard to bear. He turned to painting. Although his paintings bring millions of dollars today, in this lifetime, no one would buy his artwork. He died in abject poverty as a result of a controversial suicide.

One of the last paintings that he painted was called, The Church of Auvers. It is the unique story of his life. If you look carefully at that church building, you’ll not find any doors, just windows. It’s as if he were saying, “Those on the inside don’t care about those on the outside.”

You see a peasant woman, walking. There’s two pathways, both going around the church, not to the church, and it’s as if he were saying, “The church is no longer relevant. It doesn’t care about poor people. Those who are inside don’t want to come out, and those who are outside, can’t get in so people just walk on by it. The church can certainly become irrelevant if we are not vigilant.

Biblically, we must be engaged. If the church disengages it will become irrelevant to the culture. If it becomes irrelevant to the culture, sin and evil will prevail because Christians are the conscience of the culture.

This is an important question: Is the church relevant today? If your church went out of business, as many churches have done this past year, who would know or care? In a way, many churches were out of business for the majority of 2020. During the COVID lockdowns the government said churches were irrelevant, that they were, “Non-essentials.” Bars and liquor stores are apparently relevant or “essential,” but not churches. The trouble is, many churches agreed, contributing to the mental and spiritual decline of their members. If church leaders and church members do not view themselves as relevant, why should the community?

The challenge of relevance is real. As “*salt and light*” in the world, our job is to change our culture with the gospel. As you read in the letters to the “Seven Churches of Asia” in **Revelation 2-3**, you see that more often than not, the culture changes the churches. As a result, changed churches make no impact for Christ, they are irrelevant.

Jesus said in **John 13:34-35** (ESV):

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

More than merely sitting in a room together or even watching the same sermon over the internet, Jesus calls us to same deep-seated concern for one another as He has for us. Then, He goes further and tells us to “love our neighbors as ourselves” (**Matthew 22:39**), that is, in person in real time.

Sometimes we might feel like the little boy who was awakened during a loud thunderstorm one night. After calling to his parents several times for comfort his mother finally came into the room and said, “Didn’t I tell you that God is here with you? Don’t be afraid.” The boy replied, “Yes, but sometimes you need someone with skin on.”

Yes, God and Christians care. God is always present with His people. In fact the Bible reminds us in **Psalm 22:3** (NKJV):

**³But You are holy,
Enthroned in the praises of Israel.**

Sometimes we need a literal presence. God may or may not show that to us. That’s when the body of Christ comes into action, representing Jesus in the presence of others. That makes a church relevant to the community.

On a practical level, what does that look like? It’s not about worship styles, lost people aren’t concerned about that. Rather, Jesus sums it up at the judgment scene when people did or did not do for Him illustrated in how we treat others. **Matthew 25:31-46** reminds us of the need to help people in times of crisis. Some were hungry, thirsty, in need of clothes, needing hospitality, needing help in illness, and while in prison. Here’s the punchlines for judgment in **Matthew 25:40 and 45** (NCV):

**⁴⁰‘I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my people here, you also did for me.’
⁴⁵‘I tell you the truth, anything you refused to do for even the least of my people here, you refused to do for me.’**

This is relevance. Do you think Jesus wants us to be relevant? Do you think Jesus wants us involved in the lives of others? Of course He does.

Keep the Light of Relevance Burning!