

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH RELEVANCE?

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I Corinthians 1: 18-31

Looking back on forty years of Confirmation classes, I wish I had a nickel for every time some young person would ask me when we were going to start studying something relevant—or words to that effect. This question is not so surprising, since for some time now, we have been told that young people and some adults are abandoning the church, in large part because it no longer matters in their lives. Conversely, church marketers promise, with some success, that they can help a church to grow by providing relevant programs and effective public relations. Obviously, in our society relevance is cherished. It is an unquestioned value. It is the magic word for every occasion. One could even go so far as to say that we worship at its shrine. And not just in the church. Irrelevance is an all-purpose justification for many of our attitudes and actions. For example, when a high schooler brings home a failing grade on a report card, the explanation will often go something like this: “Yes, I know I didn’t study or perhaps even attend class, but I wasn’t interested in the subject. It didn’t mean anything to me. It wasn’t relevant!”

So what’s wrong with relevance? Well, our first reaction is likely to be “Nothing!” But this morning I want to challenge that assumption by pointing out that what we call relevance has some serious limitations. I confess that I do so with fear and trembling, because I don’t want to be misunderstood. Of course, in one sense there is nothing wrong with relevance. Obviously, if the Gospel doesn’t speak to our present condition and to the condition of world in which we live, it is not good news. There’s no question about that, but still, I would submit to you that relevance is not the be-all and end-all of life.

So what’s wrong with relevance?

In the first place, when we talk about relevance, most of the time it’s all about ME. I am the one who gets to decide what is relevant and what is not. I am grateful to Craig Barnes for pointing out that what is relevant is usually what helps ME to maintain as well as to construct the kind of life that I prefer, a life that will achieve my cherished ideal self. In other words, what is relevant is what meets MY needs as I now perceive them, and what supports MY present opinions and beliefs, which are unlikely to change in any significant way.

This fits right in with the project of the church growth marketers who promise to help us to provide relevant programs and public relations. Too often what this means is that the church needs to compete successfully with other churches and with the rest of society—with our work, our recreation, and a variety of other interests in providing resources for us as individuals to choose from an a la carte menu the building blocks of the life WE desire.

This self-centered view of relevance has very little to do with Christian faith. It has no place for God except as one of many optional resources for constructing our lives, and that God has ceased to be God. As Christians, we believe that our lives are not self-constructed in splendid isolation but created by God whose purpose is not to make the Gospel relevant to me, but to make me relevant to the Gospel. We believe in a God who has created us to live in community with others. We believe in a God who is always growing us beyond our present selves. We believe in a God who has plans for us which may have nothing to do with what

we now perceive as relevant, plans that are beyond our wildest dreams. That's one thing wrong with relevance!

Secondly, in addition to being part and parcel of this whole contemporary obsession with "ME," there is another problem with relevance. When, with the best of intentions, we try to make everything more relevant, we often end up doing more harm than good. Not long ago, Kat and I were tuned in on the car radio to an NPR discussion of the state of the liberal arts in our colleges. There was more than a little fear that the liberal arts were dying, and one panelist suggested that we might save them by making them more relevant. Every class, he said, could intentionally relate what is being studied, whether it be a piece of art or literature or history, to some specific issue in contemporary life. My wife's response was, "That sounds really boring!" I agreed, and added, not only boring but inappropriate. Should I read one of my favorite poems, Yeats' wonderfully elegaic "When I am old and gray and full of sleep" in order to talk about the problems of aging? That's not what the liberal arts are about. We all know that they're not very good preparation for finding jobs, but neither are they intended to deal directly with the specific issues of contemporary life. They exist to humanize us, to broaden our sensitivities, to liberate us from our narrowness, to enrich us with the beauty and complexity, and mystery of the creation. And that, and not just by the way, is a gift of God.

I used to shock some of my clergy friends by telling them that in college I never took a religion course. I didn't think of my four undergraduate years as relevant job preparation. There was time enough for that in seminary. I wanted first to be irrelevant, if you will, to be undergirded with the broad human experience of the liberal arts, which might have no direct connection with my profession. I've never regretted that choice.

Some of you may have read the column in the *Denver Post*, reprinted from the *New York Times*, about the ongoing controversy over the presence of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in the high school curriculum. One teacher urged that, along with some other literary classics, it be eliminated from the curriculum because it was no longer relevant. Barack Obama is President, he said, and we don't need books that repeatedly use the "N word." Others suggested that since some believe "Huck Finn" to be the greatest novel in our nation's literature, we should keep it in the curriculum, but sanitize it by omitting or rewriting the offensive words and passages, a practice that has a long, and as the column points out, an undistinguished history.

We usually associate this sanitizing with conservatives who object to profanity, blasphemy, or sexual situations. (I certainly agree with the writer of the article who is grateful that no one has proposed changing the closing words of Rhett Butler to Scarlet O'Hara to "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a hoot.") But before we get too uppity and make fun of this sanitizing, the article points out that it is just as often a project of liberals who want to be relevant and who are all too willing to remove or rewrite anything that does not support their social causes or their present religious views, or which might offend other religious or ethnic groups.

The Bible itself has a long history of these attempts to sanitize or update in order to be more relevant. No less a person than Thomas Jefferson produced his own version of the New Testament which he thought would speak more relevantly to the intellectuals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He eliminated almost all of the narrative—no good stories, no healing miracles, no birth, no death, no resurrection, no Christmas, no Easter, no old-fashioned and difficult theology. What were left as Jefferson's New Testament were the ethical teachings of Jesus.

His Bible was all mind and no heart and is now little more than a historical curiosity. More recently, there have been many popular paraphrases of the Bible in modern English prose aiming to make it more understandable and relevant to us today. They usually simplify difficult and complex words and passages, and sometimes they eliminate the sex and violence which might offend our sensibilities.

And what is the end result of all of all this well-meaning sanitizing in order to be more relevant? Perhaps it does some good, but often at the cost of much harm. Quite apart from the ethics of altering a creator's work, it often, if not usually, turns beautiful and inspiring artistry, which feeds the soul, into a bland, uninspiring prose. It also "dumbs down" by over-simplifying and even misinterpreting words and passages as difficult and complex as is the real world in which we live. It resolves mysteries which should not and cannot be fully resolved, but which should continue to be explored in our never-ending quest for truth. For Christians, whether the material be sacred or secular, our well-meaning sanitizing in the name of relevance constructs a God who is of, by, and for ourselves and our own time, a God with no staying power, a God who is much too small. This is how our obsession with relevance can do more harm than good.

Now you may wonder what all of this has to do with the passage from First Corinthians that was read this morning. If I am stretching the meaning a bit, I plead guilty as charged. I am sure Paul did not have my specific concerns about relevance in mind when he contrasted the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of God. But the Bible speaks to our time and not just to his, and you have to know that the wisdom of the world, which Paul found lacking, was the wisdom of the Greeks, the universally accepted truth of the intelligentsia of the culture where he preached, a culture whose wisdom was in many ways not unlike our own. It was a wisdom which shared much of what, in the name of relevance, I have been questioning this morning. For Paul, the foolishness of God was the Gospel critique of this human wisdom, a saving good news rejected by most of Paul's listeners as mere "foolishness."

What's wrong with relevance? As I said at the beginning, nothing if you mean that the Gospel must speak to our condition and to the condition of our world today or it is not good news. But the Gospel cannot do that if we do not see the limitations of what so often we like to call "relevance." For Christians, the wisdom of the world is always to be challenged by that Gospel, which for many may be foolishness, but for us is a wise foolishness, the foolishness of God.