

The Church has become a Mirror of the World

Scott Brown

"As a culture and as a church we are not given to much serious reflection. The consequence is that we are often molded by popular notions, rather than permeated by biblical ones. And the church looks very much like the world."

(John Piper, Future Grace, pg. 12)

Stopped in My Tracks

A few years ago, a friend gave me a book that would stop me in my tracks: God in the Wasteland, by David Wells. He exposes something that has happened to the church that I could not get out of my mind. Here are some passages that are relevant to the point I am making that the church has lost its focus:

"Evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness"

"Today, evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness. In first impressions, this worldliness does not appear ugly at all. Quite the opposite. It maintains a warm and friendly countenance, parading itself as successful entrepreneurship, organizational wizardry, and a package of slick public relations insights that are essential to the facilitation of evangelical business." P 55.

"Driven by the benefits of modernity"

"The problem lies in the current evangelical inability to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to the Christian faith. The problem, furthermore, lies in the unwillingness of evangelicals to forsake the immediate and overwhelming benefits of modernity, even when corrupted values are part and parcel of those benefits." P55

"Shaped by the sovereignty of social need"

"And so the churches that are allowing themselves to be shaped by the sovereignty of social need invariably wind up being most sensitive to the needs of the baby boomers. But can a body that contorts itself in this fashion any longer claim to be the church?"

"Allowing the consumer to be sovereign"

"allowing the consumer to be sovereign in this way in fact sanctions a bad habit. It encourages us to indulge in constant internal inventory in the church no less than in the marketplace, to ask ourselves perpetually whether the 'products' we are being offered meet our present 'felt' needs." P75

"The marketing of the church, then, may be well attended with considerable success... But, unlike its advocates, I do not believe that this validates the effort.." P87

"We eliminate obstructions to unbelievers"

"Everything is done to eliminate obstructions that typically have stood in the way of unbelievers." P80

"Technique is being substituted for truth"

"Success is not an adequate criterion for either truth or wisdom. In fact, what is now occurring within this process of adaptation to cultural practice of historic Christian faith. Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, a therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organization, those who can preach the Word of God by those who can manage an organization, the spiritual by the material. At the center of these substitutions is an individualism fired by a shallow, self centered consumerism. And along with this, and because of it, has come a debilitating loss of truth – the very thing that brought the mainline denominations low – and behind that there lies the loss of awareness of God as objective and transcendent." P86-87

A church that is "unafraid to be faithful"

"I want the church to be an alternative to post-modern culture, not a mere echo of it. I want a church that is bold to be different and unafraid to be faithful, a church that is interested in something better than using slick marketing techniques to swell the numbers of warm bodies occupying sanctuaries"... P214

Two requirements for reform

Wells argues that reform cannot happen unless two things happen:

"First, the church is going to have to learn how to detect worldliness and make a clear decision to be weaned from it. Second, the church is going to have to get much more serious about itself, cease trying to be a supermarket serving the needs of spirituality that draws from the interconnected lives of its members and is expressed through their love, service, worship, understanding, and proclamation." P215

It became more apparent to me than ever before, that as Wells has stated, "The church has become a mirror of the world".

Its structure, as it attempts to reach large numbers of people, becomes an agent of the world and a departure from scripture.

Wells indeed caused me some sleepless nights. I was bothered by the pragmatism he exposed – indeed, in my own life. I was reminded of my own actions that, however sincere, worked to secularize the churches I have been involved with. I realized that some of my opinions and actions regarding the church were often driven by the desire to be found successful. Growth is good... Right?

Mortgaging the future for worldly success

I came to the conclusion that our current church models are mortgaging the future for worldly success and numerical growth in the short term. In our churches, we have become quite good at creating great events, but these events do not always create mature disciples.

As the church has become a market-driven body, with a particular focus on growth, it has lost one of its most important functions – to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. The buildings are full but there is a famine of discipleship day to day in the homes and the businesses of the community. Church has become somewhere you go, not something you create in the midst of the community.