

"COOL" CHRISTIANITY - Entertained to Death ?

by Andrew Strom

In 1993, the well-known evangelical preacher John MacArthur put out a book entitled 'Ashamed of the Gospel' (subtitled, "When the church becomes like the world"). Obviously, because it was written by a known Conservative, many modern leaders may have found it easy to bypass this book's insights and warnings. But when I read it, I found it an incisive and devastating expose of much that is now occurring in Christendom. In it, MacArthur writes: "Traditional methodology - most noticeably preaching - is being discarded or downplayed in favor of newer means, such as drama, dance, comedy, variety, side-show histrionics, pop-psychology, and other entertainment forms... In the past half-decade, some of America's largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions and even mock striptease to spice up their Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church."

In many churches today, it is seemingly no longer 'positive' enough (in the modern TV-marketing sense of the word) to emphasize the cross, deep repentance, holiness, "death to self" and all the other meaty elements of basic Christianity which the New Testament emphasises again and again. And so we change everything (even the very essence of the gospel itself) to fit the spirit of the age in which we live.

"People don't want to hear about all that negative 'sin' stuff any more," we reason. "We'd better preach things that win them over in a positive, modern way." Thus, the epidemic of preachers who seem to sound more and more like TV commercials every week:

"Come to Jesus, He will make you happy, He will fulfill the desires of your heart, He will comfort you, He will satisfy you, etc, etc."

There is almost no difference here to the sentiments expressed in your average toothpaste commercial, but the most alarming thing of all is that many preachers seemingly wouldn't care even if there was. They cannot see what an enormous effect this 'marketing' approach is having on the very nature and content of the gospel they preach, and thus on the lives of the Christians all around them.

Their attitude often seems to be:- 'Whatever brings them in the door is OK by me.' This is the very attitude that has led to what I believe is a crisis of colossal proportions amongst today's Christian youth.

As I have said, today much of this error is flooding into the church under the guise of "relevance". In the name of 'relevance' we are rushing around desperately trying to make our music "cool" and our leadership style "cool" and our gospel "cool" and our youth events "cool", etc, etc,- all in an effort to attract the world on it's own terms. None of this is of God at all. It relies almost entirely on the 'arm of the flesh'. It is really nothing less than worldliness and compromise in a new and very subtle (yet deadly) form.

Instead of "holier than thou", it seems like we are now expected to be "cooler than thou". Our whole effort is aimed at proving to the world that Christianity is just as cool, just as

much shallow fun, just as much of a party, as the world has to offer. And so, to prove all this, we have to entertain and entertain and entertain.

We feel we have to become just like the world, in order to impress the world on it's own terms. Thus, we now need to be seen in fashionable (or better- still, 'hip' or alternative) clothes. And our youth events become an excuse for a "party". And our presentations become entertaining multi-media extravaganzas.

All in an effort to equal or "out-cool" the world. (Which is why you now see 'moshing' heads, slam-dancing and stage-diving at our youth concerts - matching the world on it's own mindless, hedonistic terms. "Lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God").

Like I said, cool pride, worldliness and rebellion - all in the name of "relevance". JUST LIKE the WORLD in EVERY SENSE. Does this sound like God to you?

Speaking of the huge Christian Greenbelt Festival held regularly in England, musician John Allen stated: "It seems undeniable that most of the audience is there simply to enjoy the music, not to think hard about anything; and there is a real danger of the emergence of the 'Greenbelt Christian', the semi-converted, shallowly committed teenager whose Christianity means little more than that he enjoys festival-going." What a tremendously significant statement! And the tragic fact is, that such 'Greenbelt Christians' are now found in their multiplied thousands right around the globe. For it is not just the large festivals that have succumbed to this spirit of entertainment. We now find this 'entertain-them-at- all-costs' approach everywhere, from local church youth groups right up to large regional gatherings. This spirit has pervaded everything, particularly those areas in the church that are connected with young people. In fact, it has become increasingly rare to find gatherings of Christian youth now in which these attitudes do not prevail.

What we are actually doing by trying to make our Christianity more worldly, is placing it at a great disadvantage. We are stripping it of the things that historically have made the Christian faith so appealing and powerful. I am also convinced that more than any- thing else, today's jaded youth will respond to a CHALLENGE. In fact, I am convinced that the greater the challenge, the more interest and the greater level of discipleship there will be. What today's "amused-to-death" young people need desperately is a cause worth fighting and dying for – a cause that calls them to deny themselves and to live a life of radical obedience to God. Jesus Christ is that cause. And if we don't provide such a challenge to today's jaded generation, then don't be surprised if some much darker cause arises to steal their allegiance. In many ways, today's youth, raised for much of their lives in a spiritual and moral vacuum, are truly ripe for the picking. And the devil knows this very well. If we are not willing to provide the youth with a cause worth dying for, then he surely will.

There has always been a 'social' aspect to the Western church that has attracted a certain 'club' membership. But this is different.

This is an epidemic, and it is being encouraged right from the very top down. Many pastors and youth leaders have concluded that it is best to give the young people what they seem to want, just so they can get the numbers in the door. And the problem is growing worse, not better. Unless something drastic is done, all I can personally see on the horizon is years and

years of such continual shallowness that we end up with churches full of people who desire little else but 'ear-tickling', entertainment and crowd-pleasing (rather than God-pleasing) "worship". In actual fact, this is already a total reality on such a massive scale in today's Western church, that it begs the question of whether true, historic Christianity can even survive much longer without being utterly swamped by the prevailing hedonism and selfishness.

Despite what we are being told, things really are that serious.
True, historic Christianity is in terrible danger on many fronts.
Unless something dramatic occurs, I see only years of increasing lukewarmness, shallowness and compromise ahead.

Surely the lament of Jesus found in Mt 15:8 is just as applicable today as it was then: "This people draw nigh to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." Where are those amongst today's youth ministries who will stand up and be counted for the Lord and His truth in our day?

From the book, "Entertaining Ourselves to Death?" by Andrew Strom

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Date : 12. 02. 2013