



WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST IS NOT OUR RELEVANCE

If we are to offer our culture what it needs most, we must pull from sources beyond it.

By Jedd Medefind

Perhaps more than any single attribute, today's Christians desire to be *relevant*: listened to, respected, wanted in the room. In contrast to those bunker-mentality Christians of yore, we yearn to swim the currents of our time, converse in its tones, and thus help to shape its character. No wonder the Christian magazine most definitive of the upcoming generation is titled, quite simply, *Relevant*. The words one secular commentator used to describe young evangelicals in Washington, D.C. apply broadly: "Above all, they fear being irrelevant."

What the world needs most from us, however, is not mere relevance. Nor has it in any age. The most vibrant moments of Christian history are those in which believers chose a prophetic role—even to the loss of perceived relevance. There's no need to don camel hair robes just yet, but it may be time to rethink our passion for relevance, and whether we'd be willing to trade it for something higher and bolder.

The road to cool at my high school led largely through sports. Martin didn't care

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much for basketball, but his six-foot-three frame helped him land a spot on the team. Most of his energy, however, was directed toward fitting in with basketball culture. He cropped his blond hair close and etched lines in it, including his eyebrows; he sagged his pants, walked with a slight limp, and memorized the lyrics of every LL Cool J song.

Martin was always well-liked. Who wouldn't love his easy grin? But over time it became clear that although the team enjoyed having Martin around, many of the guys didn't seem to greatly value his friendship. He mirrored the group culturally—even helped define it—but never seemed to form a bond deeper than fashion and shared activities. There was a certain aura of relevance about him, but often little more. After years of companionship, it seemed Martin's

connection to his teammates and contribution to their lives had been almost entirely on the surface.

As dictionaries define it, relevant means “*pertaining to the matter at hand*.” Contemporary use of the term is broader, but the essence is the same: if an object is perceived to fit with what’s currently valued, enjoyed, or admired, it is relevant.

a bit like money. When possessed and used wisely, relevance can be employed to many good uses. The danger comes when we love relevance. Then, it can become the root of all kinds of evil. As with money, we come up with all kinds of reasons why we *need* relevance to carry out God’s purposes. So we begin to seek it. And then, sometimes, to crave it.

Love of relevance can blind us to things we ought to critique and numb us to things from which we ought to recoil.

Relevance, therefore, has little to do with one’s deeper character. Rather, it’s a relationship with something external, the apparent “matter at hand.” So, whether it’s on the high school basketball team or Sunday morning talk shows, relevance carries no requirement that one be just, true, or good—only well-versed in what others have decided matters. The relevant person is simply the one skilled at echoing back to society the things it most values.

In a society obsessed with appearance and reputation, relevance is primarily cosmetic. When, as Andre Agassi put it, “image is everything,” what most people view as *the matter in hand* is often little more than fashions and trends—from attire and music to consumer products and the lingo of our sub-group.

Although relevance itself holds no virtue, neither is it inherently a vice. On its own, relevance is morally neutral. It is

This is when the danger grows severe. Love of relevance can blind us to things we ought to critique and numb us to things from which we ought to recoil. It can stand as our primary measure of success, often subconsciously, replacing the cultivation of deeper virtues. Its pursuit can consume vast time and resources that God may have given us for other purposes. And once possessed, relevance can prompt us to sacrifice almost anything rather than part with it.

Because relevance tends to mirror the trends and values of its culture, it can rarely offer society anything that it doesn’t already have—including its prejudices, excesses, and mistaken assumptions.

The polar opposite of relevant, in this sense, is *prophetic*. Prophets receive insight from beyond the echo chamber of their own culture, and then stand willing to share that truth regardless of consequence. Thus, the prophetic impulse is concerned little with the

surface of things. Instead, it thrusts toward an issue's heart, to the deeper need, the *real* matter at hand. Its objective is not to appear aligned with cultural trends, but to live and speak with integrity to standards that transcend its culture, even if that means loss of perceived relevance. Because it is not intent on mirroring the things society most values, a prophetic voice can offer the things society most lacks.

CHRISTIAN WITNESS AT ITS BEST

As the Nazi party rose to power in the 1930s, most Germans believed the vital “matter at hand” was restoration of Germany's devastated economy and lost dignity. The Nazis delivered on both counts, mingling in increasingly aggressive policies against Jews as well. But while many Catholic and Protestant leaders were privately troubled by the rising anti-Semitism, all but a few stood silent—in large part to preserve their influence amidst a society that had other priorities.

Michael von Faulhaber, however, was not one to cling to relevance. He'd first shown his mettle as a chaplain on the Western Front in World War I, becoming the first clergyman to win the Iron Cross. In 1917, he became Archbishop of Munich. As support for the Nazis bloomed nationwide, Faulhaber's 1933 Advent sermon gave unvarnished challenge to Nazi theories of race. “Let us not forget that we were saved not by German blood but by the blood of Christ!” he declared. In 1938, during the

explosive violence of *Kristallnacht*, he loaned a truck to Munich's chief rabbi to save items from his synagogue.

Even as the nation's attention turned entirely to war, Faulhaber addressed what he viewed as the real matter at hand. Creating imagery that superseded even his piercing words, Faulhaber had arm-bands with the Star of David, which Nazis used to quarantine Jews and identify them for the death camps, placed around the arms of statues of Mary and Jesus throughout his archdiocese. In the face of countless Christians who merely mirrored the values of their culture, Faulhaber stood—in the words of one noted Rabbi—as “a true Christian prelate.”

So it has been throughout history. Virtually every moment in which Christians blazed to God's glory came as they accepted a prophetic role over mere relevance: calling for an end to the barbarism of Rome's gladiator bloodfests; nailing 95 Theses to the Wittenberg doors; pushing tirelessly against the British slave trade; maintaining steadfast Christian witness behind the Iron Curtain.

In retrospect, the necessity of these choices seems obvious. But in their own time, they were not. The impulse to prophetic action was entangled by nuance, complex history, and good reasons not to act.

In each case, remaining “relevant” in the eyes of the broader culture would likely have required a different approach. The matter at hand for the large majority in each of these eras was decidedly *not* what

the prophetic voices claimed it was: the cruelty of the Roman arena, corruption in the Catholic church, the dignity of African slaves, or commitment to a faith that had been largely overrun by Communist might. Rather, as in most every age, what was most on people's minds was maintaining their own well being, enjoying life, or just getting by. So relevance called for silence, or even collusion—and many gave it. Those who did not, we now see as the true heroes of history.

NOTICED OR NOT

Looking back at historical mountaintops helps us see the stakes in choosing between the prophetic and the merely relevant. But we are misled if we come to assume that we face no such decisions until we are placed before jeering crowds or firing squads. Most prophetic choices are, in fact, small ones. "Here I stand!" moments, even for Martin Luther, may come only once in a lifetime.

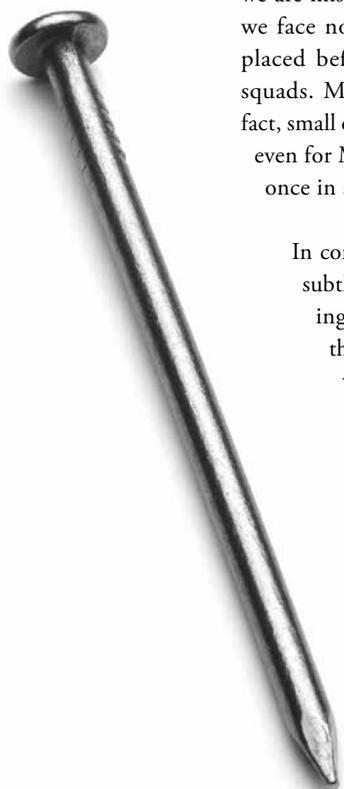
In contrast, each day presents many subtler crossroads. For every towering abolitionist like Wilberforce there were thousands who quietly went without sugar to sap revenue from the slave-dependent sugar trade. For every Solzhenitsyn, there were countless Russian Christians whose prophetic

witness consisted mainly of gathering weekly with other believers beneath the omniscient eyes of the KGB. And long before Christian emperor Valentinian outlawed the "infamously universal" practice of infanticide in 374 A.D., ordinary Christians had become known as a people that sought out infants who had been abandoned to die and took them in.

Such steps, considered alone, seemed of little historical import. They offered small hope and no guarantee that they would induce significant change. As Czechoslovakia's great playwright-prophet, Václav Havel, expressed during dark years of Soviet domination, such choices are rooted in "an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed."

Havel viewed these simple, oft-unseen choices as the foundation of any prophetic undertaking—and, ironically, the only real hope for lasting change. Even as the Communist Party held near-absolute control of citizens' lives, he articulated, "I have never fixed my hopes there [in the halls of political power]; I've always been more interested in what was happening 'below,' in what...could be won there, and what defended."

What does this look like in our day? History will certainly provide a much clearer analysis in retrospect than we can offer now. But here are a few examples of



individuals whose unheralded choices have delivered prophetic challenge to me over recent years:

Resisting Materialism. Despite the popularity of the magazine *Real Simple*, our society smiles most at what money can buy. In contrast, Jared and Jodi have chosen *real simple*: from a modest home and older vehicles, to unassuming clothes and food grown locally in the community garden. The money they save they often use generously to help people in need, from Guatemala to their small Oregon town.

Television and Time. Most people view unwinding in front of a TV as an entirely legitimate use of flexible time. Trey and Kristina have chosen to live without one. Explains Trey, “I use those hours for truly quality time with the family, to read good books, and to get involved with others who might need us. TV is relaxing, but it doesn’t leave you with much in the end.”

Bioethics. Doctors today almost universally encourage couples facing infertility to stop escalation of treatments only when money runs out or technology hits its limit. “Can it be done?” becomes the only question. Matt and Rebekah decided instead to focus on questions of medical ethics, financial stewardship, and the needs of orphans. Knowing well what it might mean, they decided they would limit treatments to simple medical interventions.

When that didn’t work, they opted for adoption.

Sports. As a standout on his freshman basketball team, fifteen year-old Alex knew the favour of a sports-obsessed culture in a basketball-loving state. This past summer, though, after a week serving orphans in Haiti, he announced to his parents, “There are more important things for my time than sports.” Instead of taking the slot open to him on the varsity team, he’s redirected his energies to raising awareness and funds for the needs of orphans in Haiti.

Church Financial Priorities. Concern for the poor is in vogue, but most American churches ultimately still invest first in growing programs and filling pews. Convinced by study in the book of James, David and the elders in his church decided to flip this. They cut the church budget deeply, from an 87% reduction in church music expenditures to ending Sunday School snacks. The substantive savings that resulted went to help indigenous churches in India care for children in need.

The Good Life for Our Families. It’s almost cliché to affirm that we should maximize wellbeing for our own kids above all, and keep things “balanced” and comfortable for ourselves. Cutting in the other direction, Carolyn and Kiel have added six adopted children to their biological ones, including several that are HIV+. Many of their friends and family don’t understand

why. “Little do they know,” Carolyn told me, “that this is the *best* life. And it’s not about how much we have, but Whom we serve.”

Caught in this trap, we become like generals fighting an earlier war. We miss entirely that our “bold” and “out of the box”

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CULTIVATING A PROPHETIC OUTLOOK

Even for those who truly desire more than relevance, a key problem yet remains. The waters we swim in—in both the broader culture and our smaller sub-cultures—colour our assumptions and viewpoints in ways we can hardly fathom. This explains why many churches in India still feel comfortable subtly incorporating the caste system; why Western society can consider abortion a medical procedure while viewing the killing of a pregnant woman a “double murder”; why many Christians in wealthy countries find no reason to question the stewardship of buying a \$50,000 car.

Perhaps even more complicating, we tend to be hyper-attuned to the sins of the prior generation and blind to our own. So we congratulate ourselves on how we’ve avoided our parents’ errors while running headlong into equally problematic opposites. Seeking to escape the last vestiges of intolerance, we lean towards *laissez-faire* morality. Escaping excesses of the Religious Right, we swing toward those of the Religious Left. Avoiding judgmentalism, we remain silent on the self-destruction that comes from living without boundaries.

maneuvers are often little more than subtle reflections of trends in the broader culture. A few decades prior, these stands may indeed have been needful and brave; today, they merely affirm society’s excesses.

If we are to live and speak for wisdom that transcends our culture’s blind spots and challenges our own generation, we need to draw from more than just the *New York Times* opinion page or even our own all-too-easily self-deceived hearts. If we are to offer our culture anything it doesn’t already have—the very things it most needs—we must pull from sources beyond it. To cultivate a prophetic view, our key allies are:

1. Scripture. God’s living word is the one Source that has questioned and challenged every culture it has encountered for 2,000 years. “It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

2. Solitude. Few things make clear vision and discernment more difficult than the constant blur of activity, noise, and information that define modern life. In time alone, amidst reflection, meditation, and prayer, this dizzying merry-go-round slows, and we begin to gain an in-focus picture of things as they

really are. If Jesus himself needed this (Luke 5:16), we're fooling ourselves if we think we don't.

3. Mentors from other eras. Even the most insightful Christian minds are influenced by the spirit of their own era, sometimes under its spell and sometimes overly defined by reaction against it. Spending time with wise believers of the past—from Augustine and Thomas à Kempis to William Law and Dorothy Sayers—serves as a potent check on the assumptions of our own unique brand of Christianity. These individuals will likely have their own errors, too, but they're rarely the same as ours.

4. Global accountability. The seven churches in Revelation each had distinct strengths and flaws. It's the same with even the most faithful communities of believers in countries around the world today. But as we interact with committed believers across the continents—and sometimes just on the other side of the tracks—we begin to recognize blind spots in our faith that had long gone undetected.

5. A few good friends. James Bond and Jack Bauer make for great screenplays, but a lone wolf stance against the real world isn't likely to last long. We are all too feeble to carry a prophet's burden alone. Much as we'd wish

otherwise, we need to be affirmed in our sacrifices, questioned amidst compromises, and urged onward through exhaustion. Perhaps this is why Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs, and why Paul never traveled alone. With just a few companions—sometimes even one—we can stand against the crowd. As C.S. Lewis observed, "It's the little knots of friends who turn their backs on the world, who truly transform it."

These five allies invite us on a hard-edged journey beyond relevance, with new tolls to pay at every crossroad. Active resistance is required if we are to truly "not conform any longer to this world's pattern, but be transformed..." (Romans 12:2). The prophetic has never been easy. It knows nothing of the restful lilt of the jellyfish, placidly adrift on the daily tide. Rather, it must strive like the salmon, bounding ever upward against current and cataract, calling with every silvery motion: this is the way home.

In the long view of history, mere relevance—attractive as it may have looked in its own day—simply cannot compare. It is no more desirable than the feathered hair of a 1980s pop star. Eventually, we always come to see the remarkable truth: the prophetic voice is the only one that was truly relevant after all.



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