

Grunge Christianity?

Counterculture's Death-Spiral and the Vulgarization of the Gospel
by John MacArthur



One of the favorite topics on the evangelical agenda these days is how the church should “engage the culture.” Do Christians need to imitate the boorish aspects of a quickly-decaying civilization in order to remain “relevant”? Some evidently think so.

We keep hearing from evangelical strategists and savvy church leaders that Christians need to be more tuned into contemporary culture.

You have no doubt heard the arguments: We need to take the message out of the bottle. We can't minister effectively if don't speak the language of contemporary counterculture. If we don't vernacularize the gospel, contextualize the church, and reimagine Christianity for each succeeding generation, how can we possibly reach young people? Above all else, we have got to stay in step with the times.

Those arguments have been stressed to the point that many evangelicals now seem to think unstylishness is just about the worst imaginable threat to the expansion of the gospel and the influence of the church. They don't really care if they are worldly. They just don't want to be thought uncool.

That way of thinking has been around at least since *modernism*¹ began its aggressive assault on biblical Christianity in the Victorian era. For half a century or more, most evangelicals resisted the pragmatic thrust of the modernist argument, believing it was a fundamentally worldly philosophy. They had enough biblical understanding to realize that “friendship with the world is enmity with God. Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

¹ <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/liberali.htm>

But the mainstream evangelical movement gave up the battle against worldliness half a century ago, and then completely capitulated to pragmatism just a couple of decades ago. After all, most of the best-known megachurches that rose to prominence after 1985 were built on a pragmatic philosophy of giving “unchurched” people whatever it takes to make them feel comfortable. Why would anyone criticize what “works”?

Whole churches have thus deliberately immersed themselves in “the culture”--by which they actually mean “whatever the world loves at the moment.” We now have a new breed of trendy churches whose preachers can rattle off references to every popular icon, every trifling meme, every tasteless fashion, and every vapid trend that captures the fickle fancy of the postmodern secular mind.

Worldly preachers seem to go out of their way to put their carnal expertise on display--even in their sermons. In the name of connecting with “the culture” they want their people to know they have seen all the latest programs on MTV; familiarized themselves with all the key themes of “South Park”; learned the lyrics to countless tracks of gangsta rap and heavy metal music; and watched who-knows-how-many R-rated movies. They seem to know every fad top to bottom, back to front, and inside out. They've adopted both the style and the language of the world--including lavish use of language that used to be deemed inappropriate in polite society, much less in the pulpit. They want to fit right in with the world, and they seem to be making themselves quite comfortable there.

Mark Driscoll² is one of the best-known representatives of that kind of thinking. He is a very effective communicator--a bright, witty, clever, funny, insightful, crude, profane, deliberately shocking, in-your-face kind of guy. His soteriology is exactly right, but that only makes his infatuation with the vulgar aspects of contemporary society more disturbing.

Driscoll ministers in Seattle, birthplace of “grunge” music and heart of the ever-changing subculture associated with that movement. Driscoll's unique style and idiom might aptly be labeled “post-grunge.” His language--even in his sermons--is deliberately crude. He is so well known for using profane language that in *Blue Like Jazz* (p. 133), Donald Miller (popular author and icon of the “Emerging Church” movement, who speaks of Driscoll with the utmost admiration) nicknamed him “Mark the Cussing Pastor.”

I don't know what Driscoll's language is like in private conversation, but I listened to several of his sermons. To be fair, he didn't use the sort of four-letter expletives most people think of as cuss words--nothing that might get bleeped on broadcast television these days. Still, it would certainly be accurate to describe both his vocabulary and his subject matter at times as tasteless, indecent, crude, and utterly inappropriate for a minister of Christ. In every message I listened to, at least once he veered into territory that ought to be clearly marked off limits for the pulpit.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Driscoll

Some of the things Driscoll talks freely and frequently about involve words and subject matter I would prefer not even to mention in public, so I am not going to quote or describe the objectionable parts. Besides, the issue has already been discussed and dissected at several blogs. Earlier this year, [Tim Challies cited one typical example of Driscoll's vulgar flippancy from Confessions of a Reformation Rev](#)³. The sermons I listened to also included several from Driscoll's "Vintage Jesus" series⁴, including the one [Phil Johnson critiqued in October](#)⁵.

The point I want to make is not about Driscoll's language per se, but about the underlying philosophy that assumes following society down the Romans 1 path is a valid way to "engage the culture." It's possible to be overexposed to our culture's dark side. I don't think anyone can survive full immersion in today's entertainments and remain spiritually healthy.

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While those who immerse themselves in it might not notice its effects instantly, they nevertheless cannot escape the inevitable, soul-destroying contamination. Let's face it: Many of the world's favorite fads are toxic, and they are becoming increasingly so as our society descends further in its spiritual death-spiral. It's like a radioactive toxicity, so while those who immerse themselves in it might not notice its effects instantly, they nevertheless cannot escape the inevitable, soul-destroying contamination. And woe to those who become comfortable with the sinful fads of secular society. The final verse of Romans 1 expressly condemns those "who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them."

Even when you marry such worldliness with good systematic theology and a vigorous defense of substitutionary atonement, the soundness of the theoretical doctrine doesn't sanctify the wickedness of the practical lifestyle. The opposite happens. Solid biblical doctrine is trivialized and mocked if we're not doers of the Word as well as teachers of it.

We could learn from the example of Paul, who engaged the philosophers on Mars Hill. But far from embracing their culture, he was repulsed by it. Acts 17:16 says, "while Paul

³ <http://www.challies.com/archives/001863.php>

⁴ http://beta.marshillchurch.org/sermonseries/vintagejesus/vintage_jesus_week_03.aspx

⁵ <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2006/10/fed-up.html>

waited for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.”

When Paul spoke to that culture, he didn't adopt Greek scatology to show off how hip he could be. He simply declared the truth of God's Word to them in plain language. And not all of his pagan listeners were happy with that (v. 18). That's to be expected. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).

Even Jesus' high priestly prayer included a thorough description of the Christian's proper relationship with and attitude toward the world: “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:14-16).

Whenever Jesus spoke of believers' being in the world, He stated that if we are faithful, the world will be a place of hostility and persecution, not a zone of comfort. **He also invariably followed that theme with a plea for our sanctification (cf. John 17:17-19).**

The problem with the “grunge” approach to religion is that it works against the sanctifying process. In fact, in one of the messages I listened to, Driscoll actually boasted that his sanctification goes no higher than his shoulders. His defense of substitutionary atonement might help his disciples gain a good grasp of the doctrine of justification by faith; but the lifestyle he models--especially his easygoing familiarity with all this world's filthy fads--practically guarantees that they will make little progress toward authentic *sanctification*.

I frankly wonder how any Christian who takes the Bible at face value could ever think that in order to be “culturally relevant” Christians should participate in society's growing infatuation with vulgarity. Didn't vulgarity and culture used to be considered polar opposites?

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