

Series: The Elephant in the Room
Part 1: Counterculture: How to be compassionate without compromising the truth
Speaker: Jeff Kennedy
April 17, 2016

Introduction: Cultural persecution of the church in America is coming to our doorstep. And as I see it we, Christ's church—we will have three choices:

The first choice is...

- **Compromise:** In American history perhaps the greatest force for evangelism came through the Robert Reike's Sunday School movement. The Sunday school movement was originally a ministry to orphans and led to countless conversions into the faith for almost a century. It was a powerful movement for change and led to a lot of Biblically based para-church charities helping those in need. Well, this morphed into what is called "The Social Gospel" where churches rightly ministered to the felt needs of hurting people and the poor but forgot their message and the mission of the Gospel of salvation. This led to the emergence of theological liberalism which swept through mainline denominations and became all the rage in American Universities and Seminaries.

Our 2nd choice is...

- **Isolation:** Christian fundamentalism emerged in response to the mass movement of compromising the Gospel—fundamentalism became a separatist movement—most of our prominent Christian universities today started out as Bible and Missions training institutions. Then something funky happened. In an attempt to safeguard the truth from liberal theological error—the church retreated from the halls of politics, the entertainment industry and public education.

3rd ...

- **Engagement:** This led to the evangelical reformation led by Bill Bright, and a dynamic young circuit preacher named Billy Graham. Together, beginning on university campuses—taking the Gospel to those very bastions of liberalism that had pushed Christianity out of mainstream life—they started a worldwide phenomenon in the 1940's which we know of today as the theologically conservative, missions minded evangelical church.

Seque: As I look at what is happening in our society today, I see that we have an opportunity. We have one of these three options before us.

We will either compromise our faith due to social and political pressure.

We will retreat and isolate in order to safeguard the sacred.

Or, we will engage the culture vigorously, graciously, and in an uncompromising effort to rescue it from the madness that they have embraced.

Transition: I am advocating today for option three. So how do we keep from becoming compromisers/compatibilists on the one hand and isolationists/separatists on the other? How do we live Christ's commands to be compassionate to those who disagree with us while be passionate about the truth of God's Word?

First conviction...

1. God has called us to be culturally engaged ambassadors of the truth.

The phrase cultural relevance has been all the rage since the 1960's. There is a genuine fear among some fundamentalist preachers today that we will somehow slip into an amorphous, vague Gospel that softens the edges of our cherished doctrines. This is surely a danger, but the answer is not to abandon speaking in ways that our receiving culture can understand. It isn't either or.

Scripture: John 3:1-15; Nicodemus and the Born Again Dilemma.

Notice in the passage that Jesus explains this all-important concept—this watershed moment of Christian salvation doctrine—to a Jewish teacher, using this power analogy of being born. And Jesus says, no one can enter the Kingdom unless they are born again.

Nicodemus protests. How can that be? You see, Nicodemus has interpreted Jesus' statement in an overly literal fashion. And Jesus has to explain it to him. It's like this...

A woman has a baby—a natural birth.

In the same way, a person must also be born from above—regenerated by the Holy Spirit—transformed from the inside out.

Jesus chastens him, “You are Israel's theology teacher. You're the prof! And I'm using earthly terms—an analogy—and you can't even grasp the most fundamental fact about entering the Kingdom of God. *How then will I speak to you of heavenly things?* If I can't even use human forms of speech and examples how could possibly pull back the curtain and show you heavenly mysteries?

Eventually Jesus does do this very thing with John the Revelator and this is why Christians have struggled to understand Revelation ever since.

In order to teach us the truth on spiritual matters, Jesus has to use pictures, parables, object lessons and the language of analogy. Truth must be communicated in a form that is apprehensible by the recipient. God always communicates the truth in the language of the receiving culture...

All kinds of examples in the Scriptures:

- The Temple—almost a copy of Egyptian temples—they Jews borrowed it from their world.
- The Synagogue—not a single command in the OT to meet weekly in synagogue houses. But Jesus repeatedly used them to preach the Gospel. The synagogue was similar to the Greco-Roman lecture hall—Paul uses one of these in Acts (Hall of Tyrannus).
- Koine Greek language—the language of the everyday folks—marketplace Greek.
- The Codex—the precursor to the book
- Stained glass windows in the 7th century—a (then) modern innovation to teach illiterate masses
- The printing press

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- And Bible apps on your smart phones...

Summary: God has always been concerned to communicate his timeless absolute truth in the language and media of a particular culture.

Sociologists call this cultural relevance
Theologians call this divine condescension
And Preachers and churchmen call this evangelism and missions.

We are called to be culturally engaged ambassadors of the Gospel of Jesus to a dying world. To get the word out in a way that is accessible and builds bridges, breaking down barriers to the Gospel of Jesus.

Second conviction...

2. We are called to be a countercultural Gospel-centered community.

A counterculture is by definition any subculture whose values and norms of behavior differ substantially from those of mainstream society, often in opposition to mainstream cultural mores.

So to translate all that... *We're different.*

So on the one hand, we are called to be an embassy of Heaven—Good News ambassadors—sojourners in a foreign land. We are intended to be a Kingdom outpost in a hostile territory.

Look at this next part in John 3...

Scripture: John 3:16-21 While Jesus begins to explain the truth in a way that Nicodemus can access it, the text does not compromise what is true. Can we just take a second here to really look at what John 3:16ff. actually says. Because I see it tattooed on people's shoulders and embraced by football players, and a few years back was the most googled phrase that year. Keith Urban has a song—one of my favorites—called, you guessed it “John 3:16.” But can we just look at what it actually says. Because the substance of this famous passage is very countercultural.

This verse asserts:

- That God loves the world and doesn't want to judge it or condemn it. God's motivation is love for his creatures.
- That God made the ultimate sacrifice to show us the extent of his love, the death on cross of his only begotten Son.
- That everyone may be and be saved and escape the coming judgment—which is a permanent state of death and conscious separation from God.

I can't think of a passage in Scripture that more eloquently presents God's motivation for sending his only Son—God loves you that much. And he sent his only Son—not to condemn us but to save us—

but you can't be saved if you don't acknowledge that you're lost—that there is a coming judgment that God is trying to avoid!

How are we, specifically, a countercultural movement? I want to give you three nails to hang your thoughts on today—three pegs that you should just internalize and commit to memory—and they're easy don't worry...

The first one is this...

- **We have a countercultural belief system.** From the world's perspective we believe some pretty crazy stuff.

There are 3 worldviews that exist in today that stand in opposition...

- **Secularism (philosophical naturalists):** Deny the existence of anything spiritual including God or an afterlife or a real self—what we call a soul. They are modernists who believe in a scientific epistemology—that the only real theory of knowledge is that which can be proven by the scientific method. But of course, that belief system itself is not accessible by the scientific method—so it's literally self-refuting. But they think we're a bunch of kooks—crackpot religious fanatics who are out of touch with reality—for believing in the existence and emergence of a spiritual realm.
 - **We believe in the existence of one, supreme, triune God.** The sole proprietor and creator of the natural world and the spiritual world.

The 2nd worldview option that stands opposed to the Christian faith is...

- **Postmodernism:** Which disavows the existence of objective reality. The postmodernist says that all propositions are valid, that there are no absolute truths, YOUR truth is THE truth FOR YOU. The problem here is that this is also a self-refuting worldview because if all truth propositions are allowed and none are delimited—then the Christian faith's exclusive claims of Christ are on the table. In the pool of live options.
 - **We believe that there is a real God,** actual truths, and that the world as we experience it corresponds to reality...in other words the world and truth are real and they are knowable.

The 3rd is...

- **Paganism:** Paganism is making a comeback. Every generation feels the need to buck and rebel against the ideas that have reigned supreme in society. And Christian monotheism (belief in one supreme, eternal God) has been the reigning idea in American culture for over 200 years. But there is a growing trend today for people to embrace many gods—a notion the Old and New Testaments vehemently disavow.
 - **We believe in one eternal supreme God who has decisively revealed himself** in the person and work of Jesus, the world's rightful King.

Summary: We have a countercultural belief system.

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- **We have countercultural values**...Our values aren't the same as the worlds. What do we value?
 - **Objective moral values:** Because we believe in objective truth—we believe that there are certain moral values that have been objectively/externally imposed on us. We are morally obligated to refrain from stealing our neighbors stuff. Or killing our neighbors. This moral law is intrinsic to human nature not because we have evolved a herd mentality to simply not kill our neighbor because of social or survival implications—but it has been imposed on us by a God who created us in his image and has the right to make certain demands on our behavior. We believe these moral values and duties would not exist if God had not placed constraints on human behavior and given us an impulse to act compassionately toward our fellow man.
 - **Ex.** Society has abandoned the LGBT community. **Written them off.** Cest la vie. Here's what I want to say to the LGBT community—your culture has abandoned you. They don't have any answers at all. They can't help you because they are inept doctors and healers. Deep in your heart you know something isn't right. Our response to them cannot be isolationism. It can't be to simply turn it off, crawl in our citadel of Christian group think, and pretend it's going to go away. We are to build bridges, break down barriers, and bring the lifeline of the Gospel to a world gone mad with sin. We can bring the light of salvation and healing to their brokenness.
 - **Ex.** Quite frankly, society has abandoned the unborn and those teenage moms who are being told there are no emotional and spiritual consequences for terminating the life of a child as birth control.
 - **Ex.** Our culture has forgotten the next generation—left them to make what they will of a life without moorings to absolute truths and values.
- **We are a countercultural community**... We hear a lot about the gay and lesbian community, or the “black” or “Hispanic” community, the academic community, and now we have the social media revolution which has created the cyber community. But we are Christ's community. And we're offering you something you can't find in any other fellowship. It's a lifeline to God's salvation, it's healing for your brokenness and it's a fellowship of men and women—all imperfect—all of us a work in progress—who've been transformed by God's saving work on the cross of Jesus.
 - **We're a gathering worshiping community**—worshiping God as our highest calling.
 - **We're a growing fellowship**—imperfect but improving and growing in our knowledge of God and understanding of his truth.
 - **We're a going community**—sending ambassadors to engage our world and society with God's truth and his salvation.

That's who we are. That's what we're about. We believe these truths, we uphold these biblical values and we connect in relationship as God's people...

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3 Takeaways if we are to be active in the world but not of it...

1. **Know your God and His Word.** If there was ever a time when God's people needed to press in and become fully devoted worshipers, growing in the knowledge of God's truth—it's now. We need to have our feet/foundation outfitted with the readiness that comes from the Gospel.
2. **Engage the world as a gracious emissary**—unwavering in our commitment to truth and without hesitating to reach out with God's mercy to the abandoned people in our culture.
3. **Be prepared to dialogue, to discuss and defend** the truth as persecution comes to our doorstep.

As I said at the outset, it's coming, and we need to be the model of grace and unmovable standard bearers for God's Word and common sense.

Prayer/Worship