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Leadership

The Problem with Pizzazz

Has entertainment replaced Scripture as the center of our worship?
Chuck Swindoll

Monday, May 2, 2011

A Leadership Journal interview with Chuck Swindoll

A survey in 2009 asked pastors to identify the most influential living preacher. Chuck Swindoll came in second only to Billy Graham. How does one use that kind of cachet? Apparently to call the church back from its captivity to entertainment.

Dr. Charles R. Swindoll is the pastor of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, the chancellor and former president of Dallas Theological Seminary, a prominent radio preacher on Insight for Living, and a prolific author.

His latest book, [The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal](#), outlines the dangers when churches seek the world's affirmation and copy the world's methods. Leadership Journal's senior editor Skye Jethani spoke with Swindoll about the use of entertainment values in worship.

Early in your book you say that when the church becomes an entertainment center, biblical literacy is the first casualty. So why do you think the church has become so enamored with entertainment?

We live in a time with a lot of technology and media. We can create things virtually that look real. We have high-tech gadgets that were not available to previous generations. And we learned that we could attract a lot of people to church if we used those things. I began to see that happening about 20 years ago. It troubled me then, and it's enormously troubling to me now because the result is an entertainment mentality that leads to biblical ignorance.

And alongside that is a corporate mentality. We're tempted to think of the church as a business with a cross stuck on top (if it has a cross at all). "We really shouldn't look like a church." I've heard that so much I want to vomit. "Why?" I ask. "Do you want your bank to look like a bank? Do you want your doctor's office to look like a doctor's office, or would you prefer your doctor to dress like a clown? Would you be comfortable if your attorney dressed like a surfer and showed movies in his office? Then why do you want your church's worship center to look like a talk show set?"

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "When the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first."

When a church is spending more on media than shepherding, something is wrong.

Some time ago a group of church leaders decided that they didn't want to be hated. They focused just on attracting more and more people.

But if we're here to offer something the world can't provide, why would I want to copy the world? There is plenty of television. There are plenty of talk shows. There are plenty of comedians. But

there is not plenty of worship of the true and living God.

You think it's rooted in a deep insecurity that we have as church leaders?

Yes, I do. I think you've put your finger on it. We want a crowd to make us feel important and liked. But why is getting a crowd our focus? Jesus never suggested that crowds were the goal. He never addresses getting your church to grow. Never. So why is that the emphasis today?

We can look back before modern technology entered the sanctuary and see the same values at work. The crusades of Billy Graham, the revivals of the Great Awakening, even all the way back to the Reformation, you see that Martin Luther used music and forms of worship that were relevant to his German culture. So what's wrong with taking relevant cultural expressions in the 21st century and using them in our worship?

Nothing, if they square with Scripture and if they honor the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing wrong with using something new. We are called to sing new songs. I love them. Nobody sings louder in our church than I do—both the old and new songs.

But everything must square with Scripture. We must make sure that new things actually help people grow in the truth, that they edify the saints and build them up. Will it equip them to handle the world around them? Will it form them into the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of this world?

In many cases we use new things because they are novel, not because they are helpful.

So the issue is not innovation or tradition, but why we're using a particular method or technology.

Exactly. I have been to church services, and you have too, where the only people who knew the songs were the band. I'm not edified. I'm just watching a show. And they're not interested in teaching me the songs either. They just sing louder to make up for the fact that no one else is singing. Loud doesn't help. Why do they do that? Do you want me to be impressed with how loud you are singing, how accomplished you are? I'm not. I'm not here to be impressed with you. I'm here to fall back in love with Christ.

Innovation doesn't have to be loud or a gimmick. How about silence? Most people get no silence in their world. Imagine three or four minutes of silence. No music. No background distractions.

Or change the order of worship. Start the service with an invitation rather than ending with it. Nothing in the Bible says to walk down an aisle. So be innovative. I'm not against screens, or new songs, or innovation. I just don't like the gimmicks. I want to know when worship is over that that leader's sole purpose was to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. He's not important to himself, and I'm not.

Here's what troubles me: I don't know why leaders younger than me aren't saying this. I'm not talking about novices, but the leaders in their forties and fifties. Why aren't they raising questions and showing some concern for where the church is heading with its focus on media and headcount and passive spectating? I know one church that has 17 people on their media staff and only 12 on the pastoral staff.

When a church is spending more of its budget on media than shepherding, something is out of whack. We have gotten things twisted around. My book is simply saying come back, folks. I'm not against innovation. But we need more wisdom.

Speak to the 35-year-old pastor leading a young, growing church. The ministry is focused on communicating the gospel and honoring Christ, but he wants to incorporate more technology and media. How does that pastor know how far to go? What are the red flags he and his team should look for?

First, he needs to surround himself with people that ask the hard questions, people that are not all his own age.

Second, he needs to study the Scriptures deeply and ask whether he can square what they're

doing with what the Bible says should be their focus.

Third, he should ask whether or not this the best use of our money and time. Would I spend my time better pouring over God's Word, in prayer, getting my heart right, mentoring younger men and women, and building into my staff? What investment of my time is going to lead others to say, "You know what, these people are so different; this is so refreshing; this is beautiful."?

That was a major theme in your book. Ultimately what attracts the world to the church are sanctified people, filled with God, living in communion with him and one another, and not an entertaining show.

I'm so glad you got that. It's called "the body."

Let's talk about what you do on Sunday morning. How do you discern the difference between the genuine presence of God among his people, and a fabricated experience generated by the staging, music, and lights?

That's the danger of using too much media and technology in worship. I try to keep it as simple as I can. I deliberately hold back. I don't plan out every single phrase so that it's timed exactly with a slick presentation. I deliberately leave room for the Spirit to lead.

We use video occasionally but about eight to ten times a year, no more. We're not here to show videos. People have videos all week long. We use the screens for a song or two that we don't know. Otherwise we're using hymnals.

We try to keep it simple so that the pizzazz doesn't become the reason to bring a neighbor. You have to come see the light show next week. Man, it is unbelievable! The thing will knock your socks off ... Wrong. They can stay home and watch that on Friday night.

When you come Sunday, you're going to focus on One who is eternal, and we're all going to meet him together. And in doing so, we're going to leave different than we came because we will have been in his awesome presence, and we will be ignited by the work of the Spirit within us.

You are a very engaging communicator. Philip Yancey even said that "Charles Swindoll doesn't have a boring bone in his body." Some might even say that you are very entertaining to listen to. How do you reconcile that with what you've just said about the dangers of being entertainment driven? How do you ensure that people attracted to your ministry are engaging it for the right reason?

I talk about that. I tell them, "Keep me off the pedestal. You're heading for a real disappointment if you put me on that pedestal. I am a sinner just like you are. Yeah, I've got gifts. I can't help it. That's the way God made me. But don't think I'm better than I am."

One of the best pieces of counsel I got was from a staffer with The Navigators named Jim Petersen. He had ministered in Sao Paulo, Brazil, for years with great effectiveness. I said, "How did you do it, Jim?" He said, "Oh, I let them see the cracks in my life." I love that answer.

So I blow it from time to time. I lose my place in my sermon. The other Sunday I read from the wrong passage of Scripture—I was a full book away from where I was supposed to be. We all had a good laugh about it.

I let people see the cracks in my life. We can't be phony. We've got to keep it real.

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