

## RELEVANCE

by Shaun Groves . Originally published by Relevant Magazine

I'm wearing my *Relevant* magazine T-shirt. Across the chest a flame design and above it these words: "Relevant: Life. God. Progressive culture." Cool.

It's not exactly cool. An almost three-year-old artist made a few additions to the design this morning. Her tiny hands worked for almost an hour peeling and sticking smiley faces and flowers over the flames on my chest. At least 50 stickers. And the final touch—a piece of tape spread across the word Relevant and a new "word" scrawled over it in marker: "Daddy," she said. "I love you." And she smiled. I did too.

So I look loved instead of cool today.

There are two churches in America. One obsessed with tradition and the other addicted to cool. Both taken with themselves.

I play for both because I love both. The youngest of the two churches stands as a beacon to those attracted to popular culture and anything that resembles it. Once inside its doors I feel comfortable. I'm met by "greeters" and handed a full color brochure advertising the many services and programs this church offers. My fellow attendees and I—for the word "member" is not spoken often here—grab lattes and stroll leisurely into the worship center in hopes of finding community, experiencing God and digesting another weekly topical talk about faith.

We're treated to the latest that audio and visual technology has to offer: lights, cameras, speakers and more speakers, video walls and amplifiers. This is what we in the contemporary church believe a lost soul seeks. Surely our lack of pews, hymnals and choirs are the tractor beam that will suck in the Christless masses. And it seems to be working. When asked how their church is doing, leaders of such modern congregations often tell me of growing numbers and show me drawings of their construction's next phase.

And having worked at such a church, I confess to sometimes looking down my nose as I look down the street at the more traditional or less cool church. I've wondered, "When will they ever wake up and have a passion for the unchurched men and women of this city the way we do? How will God ever use them if they're not doing things our way?"

For surely, I've thought, ours is God's way. I've believed at times that the traditional church isn't really accomplishing much. Surely God works best when using the most well-produced and orchestrated "cutting edge" music and conversational vernacular. Surely, I've thought, those whose communications, infrastructures and buildings most closely resemble those in young popular culture are the most effective disciple makers and evangelists today. We are, after all, the most "relevant."

But I grew up in this other “uncool” American church. Our motto seemed to be: It’s worked for the last hundred years, and it’ll work for a hundred more. Nothing ever changed. We sat on wooden pews as old as the songs we sang. We almost never stood as we droned the ancient hymns of our faith with all the emotion of a Zoloff addict. I’m almost positive that until I reached college I had never sung a song written in the 20th Century unless it was written by Bill Gaither.

And we too looked down the street in amazement at what those crazy people that played electric guitars and such were doing under the guise of church. For surely, I thought, ours is God’s way. Our music isn’t full of meaningless repetition but instead drips with weighty truth and sound doctrine. Ours is a serious gathering, for the wages of jocularly and folly are serious when eternity is at stake. Lost souls need repentance at the foot of a bloodied cross, not entertainment.

But I was wrong on both accounts. And so are many others in America who believe that any one style or method of ministry is God’s at all, no matter how old or new it may be.

I’ve traveled a great deal over the last several years. I’ve played music in hundreds of churches, most of which bore a striking resemblance to one of the two I’ve described. And regardless of which they take after, from what I’ve seen they are equally as likely to be effective or ineffective ministries. And like the blind man answering to the Pharisees when questioned about how Jesus worked in his life, all I really know is what I’ve seen.

And I’ve seen a prostitute weeping as she ran down the aisle of a church as a robed choir with hymnals in hand sang “all to Jesus I surrender” and a suited preacher stood waiting for her at the front. I’ve seen graduating seniors commissioned as missionaries to Uganda and Kyrgistan on a stage in front of enormous video walls as they were prayed over by a casually-dressed, spikey-haired minister. I’ve seen people increasing in their knowledge of God and being sent out to make God known in converted movie theatres and stained glass cathedrals.

How could this be? Does God not have a design for ministry that He favors over another? Is there no methodology or strategy that we can call His and adhere to in order to gain better results for His name’s sake? There is a secret to successful ministry, but it doesn’t lie in the traditions of one church or the modernity—or post-modernity—of another.

It’s love.

We can speak with the tongues of men and of angels. We can be given every spiritual gift and understand every mystery of God. We can swell with a faith that could move mountains. We can give up all we have. But without love we are nothing and so are these things we do, no matter how relevant or historical we have deemed them to be.

We can design the perfect modern structure and fill it with every convenience and attraction man can concoct. We can somehow replicate and sanctify every aspect of popular culture. Likewise, we can pass on the meaningful traditions, liturgies and lessons of those pilgrims before us. We can value reverence and non-conformity to the outside world. But without love our efforts will mean nothing.

The moderns are right, however. We do need to be relevant. Relevance is literally having importance or making connection. And anything done in love—even if by the staunchest traditionalist—is just that. An invitation is always relevant to the lonely. Hope is always relevant to the depressed. A hot meal is relevant to the hungry. A free baby-sitter is relevant to a single mother needing a break. An hour is relevant to kids that can't read. A voice is relevant to the poor and oppressed. Love can make anyone relevant.

Even me. A father of two typing away in a sticker-covered T-shirt that was cool when I put it on this morning. Who cares about cool though? I'd rather have love.