

Faith Pulpit

A Call for Relevance

The need for relevance is a problem faced by most Christian workers today. However, this struggle is not new to our time. Even the Apostle Paul dealt with it. Historically, it has been the more liberal theologians who made relevance a key concern in the ministry. They cared more for people and their needs than for the Truth of God's Word. Now it has become a significant factor in conservative theology. One of the more recent evidences of this change has been the ascension of relational theology and the decline of transactional theology. Relational theology emphasizes preaching and teaching concerning life situations. Its focus is centered on psychological concepts like self-awareness and self-image. Transactional theology majors on the great transactions of God in redemption and justification. It is concerned with the work of Christ's cross and resurrection.[1](#)

Today's Call For Relevance

One of the men seeking nomination as a presidential candidate this year clearly illustrated how current this subject is in our life and ministry. His remarks about a Christian college that made a change in its rules were, "It is about time. They have finally come into the eighteenth century; now perhaps they will make it into the twenty-first century." College and seminary leaders face this issue in training Christian leaders. Pastors must deal with it as they are challenged to build "seeker" churches that adjust the church's ministry to every possible element of society. Writers of homiletic texts describe relevance as "bridge building."[2](#) This bridge crosses the culture gap between ancient and modern times. Relevance is pictured as a bridge which will bring the Bible out of Judaism/Jerusalem's society and into the twentieth century's society. This is a major undertaking, moving from donkeys, shepherds, and camels, to the age of automobiles, advanced technology, and space exploration. This concept of relevance

raises several key questions for us that this article will attempt to answer.

Is The Call For Relevance All Bad?

Of course not. However, we must be clear in defining what is meant by relevance. One definition views relevance as understanding the culture of today's society. This knowledge then controls the church's methods of ministry. By this definition, society and its culture determine the conduct and ministry of the church. Another definition says relevance involves a "close logical relationship with and importance to the matter under consideration."³ According to this definition, the use of language and cultural interests is essential to relating. Educational theory has called this learning from the known to the unknown. Jesus related to people in His ministry by this method. He used their language. He taught by parables about things they lived with every day. Charles Haddon Spurgeon prepared his sermons with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. His book, *My Little Shilling Book, The Bible and The Newspaper*,⁴ described this approach. Relevance is right when it relates Bible Truth to people's pressing needs and perennial questions.

Where Does The Relating Of Truth To Life Begin?

This is a crucial question. Beginning points determine priority items. Bridging the culture gulf between Bible times and the twenty-first century must have its beginning with the Word of God. People need to understand what the Bible said and meant to the culture of its day before they can relate that Truth to today's world.

How Is The Gap From Truth To Life Needs Bridged?

Paul answered this question in 2 Timothy 3. He described a society which he called "the last days."⁵ He called the culture of this society "perilous."⁵ What did he mean by the term *last days*? Paul used this same term in 1 Timothy to describe the entire Church Age, beginning with Pentecost and concluding with the Rapture.⁶ What did he mean when he called the world's culture during this time "perilous"? The only other time this word is used in the New Testament, it is translated *fierce*.⁷ There it describes the man of Gergesenes, who was possessed by many devils, as fierce and uncontrollable. Paul said that the spirit of this world's culture in the Church Age was a demon-controlled fierceness. It was like raging beasts that were out of control. He also described the philosophy of this world's culture as Humanistic ("lovers of their own selves"), Materialistic ("covetous, boasters, proud"), and Hedonistic ("lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God").⁸ Such a culture has never perceived Bible Truth as relevant. Indeed, the world's culture and Bible Truth have always been poles apart.

Because of this cultural attitude, Timothy was instructed to relate to this fierce, animalistic society by showing that Bible Truth was distinctively different.⁹ His turning away action was imperative, in the present tense, and demanded personal action. Second, Timothy was to be a Godly example before the world's Godless culture. His intimate association with Christ was to demonstrate a character like Jesus'—pure, holy, gracious, and kind.¹⁰ Finally, Timothy was to boldly face the world's culture that had no absolutes. Paul commanded him to stand strong in the Truth of God's Word as the only answer to man's needs.¹¹ Paul beautifully outlined God's plan for relevancy that believers were to use all through the Church Age.

God's plan has one principle which governs relevancy: God's Word alone, not society's philosophy, determines the Church's philosophy of ministry. Relevancy is not achieved by compromising with this world's culture, but by confronting that culture with the claims of God's Word.

Works Cited

1. Lloyd M. Perry, & Charles M. Sell, *Speaking To Life's Problems*, 41–45.
2. John Stott, *The Art Of Preaching In The Twentieth Century: Between Two Worlds*, 135–179.
3. *New World Dictionary Of American English*, third edition, 1133.
4. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, 54.
5. 2 Timothy 3:1.
6. 1 Timothy 4:1–5.
7. Matthew 8:28.
8. 2 Timothy 3:1–4.
9. 2 Timothy 3:5, "from such turn away."
10. 2 Timothy 3:10–12, "...live godly in Christ Jesus..."
11. 2 Timothy 3:14–4:2.

Dr. Elvin K. Mattison

Former Professor at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. Elvin K. Mattison (Ph.D., Wayne State University) was a distinguished pastor, educator, and theologian with a profound commitment to ministry and theological education. Dr. Mattison dedicated 22 years to pastoral ministry in Michigan and Connecticut before transitioning to academia. He served as a professor at institutions including Spurgeon Baptist Bible College in Mulberry, Florida; Northwestern Baptist Seminary in Tacoma, Washington; and Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa.

His international influence extended through teaching pastors at the doctoral level in India and South Korea. Known for his beautiful Irish tenor voice, he recorded an album titled "Songs of the Savior." Dr. Mattison entered glory in 2004.