



TOO COOL FOR THE KINGDOM

How Cultural Accommodation is Strangling the
Church

John Mark Nielsen

Too Cool for the Kingdom: How Cultural Accommodation is Strangling the Church

In the last book he ever wrote, “The Vanishing Evangelical,” Calvin Miller (beloved author of over 40 books) warned of an irreversible pendulum swing that would catapult the church into the cultural ghetto of insignificance. The post-modern culture, coupled with an incessant desire to please it by the very ones who should be challenging it, would usher in this malady.

According to Miller, the “seeker-friendly” movement spawned in the late 90s in America brought forth the bitter fruit of church abandonment: unprecedented numbers of Millennials abandoning the church in search of a true spirituality that could satisfy their longing for significance. Interesting twist, isn't it? The church, hoping to retain an emerging generation, runs to accommodate them, only to be rejected because they are too accommodating and come off as cheap and unauthentic.

This downward trend of the church of the 21st century, he writes, is due to post-modernism and a long list of accommodations by the church to an increasingly decadent culture. The state of evangelicalism is personified in a condition, coined by Robert Bellah in [Habits of the Heart](#), called “Sheilaism,” where would-be churchgoers place personal preference above theological depth, opting a “mix and match” approach, where their preferences replace Biblical values. The term is taken from a comment made by a nurse, Sheila Larson:

I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice ... It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.

The Peril of Abandoning the Basics

Instead of investing precious time equipping and challenging the new generation to go deep and master the basics of the “things that Jesus began to do and teach,” the church acquiesced to the culture around it in hopes of pleasing its icons. In the case of the 21st century, these icons are inward looking Shelaites.

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Barna's Cultural Resource Center has released the results of three worldview surveys conducted earlier this year:

- The [first](#) of these concluded that America's dominant worldview is Syncretism, which isn't actually a worldview at all but rather "a disparate, irreconcilable collection of beliefs" that people paste together to suit themselves.
- The [second survey](#) concluded that America's most popular worldview is what can be called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Components of this worldview include: "belief in a God who remains distant from people's lives" and "the universal purpose of life of being happy and feeling good about oneself."
- The [third survey](#) found that Millennials are "substantially more likely" than previous American generations to "reject biblical principles in favor of more worldly spiritual perspectives and practices."

Drowning in A Culture We are Trying to Save

We are drowning in a culture we are trying to save. Like the proverbial frogs in a kettle, we are being groomed for consumption by social engineers. Like missionaries to Borneo in the 19th century, we are the meal of the ones we hunger to convert.

Calvin Miller pointed us to the rudimentary task of the Christian missionary:

“A missionary can never be a missionary until he or she learns the art of looking around...The reason evangelicalism is dying is that the churches have made an unvoiced decision to quit looking around. They have agreed to die through the process of being concerned about nobody but themselves.”

What to do? Romans 12:1-2 spells out a recipe for the ailing 21st-century Christian soul:

“Brothers and sisters, in view of all we have just shared about God’s compassion, I encourage you to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, dedicated to God and pleasing to him. This kind of worship is appropriate for you. Don’t become like the people of this world. Instead, change the way you think. Then you will always be able to determine what God really wants—what is good, pleasing, and perfect.”

And what is it that God really wants? The famous last words of Jesus frame God’s will for us succinctly:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to you. Then you will be my witnesses to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

God’s will is that we stop looking at ourselves, abandon our “culturally correct” strategies and focus on the training manual Jesus passed onto us. The kingdom syllabus is His life model, embodied in “the things He began to do and to teach.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Mark Nielsen has championed young people for five decades on four continents. After a decade of youth ministry in California, he married Stasia and stepped into global missions, mentoring teens and twenty somethings in places like Hong Kong, Australia, Mexico, and Europe. He directed a School of Evangelism for several years that reached into high schools and universities across Australia, focusing on leadership development, evangelism and apologetics. He is a founding member of Justice for Youth (promoting human trafficking awareness) and presently directs the Lighthouse Prayer Network.

John and Stasia have served together as missionaries for nearly 40 years and home-schooled all six of their children on the field.