

The Point: Evangelical Christendom

Chat and image, I submit, are two of the chief preoccupations of our time. In this book, I am concerned with both – but not in society, TV, business, politics, and the like. Oh no! Nothing better can be expected from the world. Believers are living in a fallen society, a fallen world made up of fallen, sinful men and women, a wicked world, a world under Satanic domination:

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one... There is no fear of God before their eyes’... There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:9-23).

Believers know that:

...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4).

Nobody can doubt the enslaving power which sin has – in all its forms. Christ laid it on the line when addressing the Jews – a religious people if ever there was one:

The truth will set you free... Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin (John. 8:32-34).

Indeed, believers know that they themselves were once held in this ruinous captivity, this slavery to sin:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

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But that:

The Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age (Gal. 1:3-4).

We know that we [true believers] are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19; see also John 12:31; 17:15).

As Christ, still addressing the Jews, declared:

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36).

The point is, preoccupation with chat and form is a mark of fallen man. It takes a signal demonstration of God's power to put a stop to chat, to silence unbelievers, 'that every mouth may be stopped' (Rom. 3:19).

Yes, this age is evil, and the world is ruled by Satan. No wonder, then, that chat and appearance, talk and image, show and form, dominates such a world. Look how Adam and Eve, as soon as they fell, were instinctively consumed with appearance, fig leaves and talk, making excuses, passing the buck (Gen. 3:7-13). Whatever else was going through their minds, they weren't stuck for words, words to put themselves in the best light. And ever since, all of Adam's descendents have been born with the same innate love of chat and form, the ability to come up with reasons to chat to enable them to fulfil their *desire* to chat.

But it is not what is going on in the world that interests me; it is what is going on in the churches, among believers; that is what concerns me. Church trend-setters – evangelicals in the van – have cottoned on to what makes the world tick, what it likes. And that is chat and image.¹ Why not go some way to meeting the world's aspirations, baiting the hook, to engineer² the chance to evangelise them? Evangelical trend-setters have spotted what works in the world. Why shouldn't

¹ On image, see my *A Case*.

² A seemingly in-word for the evangelical trend-setters today. See my *Relationship*.

that which works in the world not work in the church? By unearthing what works in the world, and then devising sophisticated schemes and programmes based on these successful models, the clever opinion-formers have enabled failing churches to ‘re-engineer’ (here we go again!) themselves in order to bring ‘success’. Image and presentation, these trend-setters know, are key to this ‘re-engineering’. The ‘failing’ in question is falling church attendance; ‘success’, naturally, is increasing church attendance.

And it works; this ‘re-engineering’ of the *ekklēsia* is in many cases leading to a rising church-attendance. Of course some churches can’t or won’t keep up, get trampled in the lemming-like rush, and peter out. But no matter; the few remaining attendees can always switch from the defunct, dying corner-shop to the big, successful superstore down the road. This, in turn, ensures the further success of the successful in boosting church attendance. The stick-in-the-mud-church withers, while the modern dream-factory flourishes like a green bay tree planted by a never-failing stream.

In all this, image and chat are king – in the world and in the church. It is the age of image and chat. It is presentation – image – that attracts the consumers. But that’s only the start of it. Once the consumers have been attracted, the church knows it must teach them how to chat; that is, teach them to use the right language. And project the right image. Evangelical Christendom has done its homework, and done it well; it has mastered the lessons it has gleaned from the world: having the right image and using the right chat is what spells success. Moreover, it has set up polished courses for the ‘not-yet-converted’ to teach them – in the spirit of N.T.Wright³ – to learn ‘their part in the play’, and ham it for all its worth!

³ See my *Conversion; Hinge*.

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I have already said that although this has mushroomed in the present generation, and is ‘flourishing’ – what an oxymoron – it is not only a modern phenomenon. Let me now make good that claim.